

POETISA CHIC:
FASHIONING THE MODERN FEMALE POET
IN CENTRAL AMERICA, 1929-1944

By

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation explores the cultural and literary “fashionings” of Central American female poets of the 1930s in order to demonstrate how some of these poets entered the lettered city (Ángel Rama’s term for the nexus of the Latin American city, written discourse and political and social power), a metaphoric place still dominated by men at that time. Recent Central American cultural studies have found the 1930s to be a critical decade of dictatorships, nascent revolutionary movements, modernization, and foreign imperialism that sets the stage for the conflicts of the later twentieth century. My project takes part in this scholarship by attending to the significant increase in published female poets during this time. I recover their previously unstudied poetry and examine its participation in contemporary middlebrow aesthetics, theosophy, discussions of modernization, mestizaje, and social revolution. Close readings of women’s poetry in relation to other cultural texts (such as photography, film, narrative, pedagogy, and state propaganda) demonstrate how literary criticism and cultural studies can work together to provide a richer view of literature’s roles in both underpinning and undermining hegemonic views on gender relations.

The idea of fashion brings together gender, modernity, cultural production, and consumption in the poetry of many of the authors I study. In that the verb, to fashion, and the Greek verb, poiein, both mean “to create,” this study examines the poetics and fashionings of social and historical processes of 1930s Central America. In particular, fashion theory—the study of fashion as communication—allows me to consider the complexities and ambiguities that poetry and fashion encompassed for women as sign systems. Each chapter draws on the work of several Central American female poets—among whom are well-recognized Clementina Suárez and Claudia Lars—and analyzes their verse vis-à-vis non-poetic texts taken from “high,” mass-mediated, and popular cultures. Setting the stage for subsequent chapters, chapter 1 uses reception studies to consider the poetisa aesthetics and gendered literary communities of Carmen Sobalvarro, Olivia de Wyld, Magdalena Spínola, and Claudia Lars. Chapter 2 considers the modernizing force of erotic verse, which invests women’s sexuality with power in the work of Alma Fiori, Clementina Suárez, and Olga Solari. Chapter 3 looks at theosophy and its potential for both framing and veiling socially and politically subversive readings in the works of Angelina Acuña, Claudia Lars, and Clementina Suárez, and chapter 4 examines the different ways in which Carmen Sobalvarro, María de Baratta, and Olivia de Wyld use the huipil as a trope of indigenism. Finally, my conclusion sets the stage for future work on this generation’s use of the lyric as a platform for promoting feminism and social revolution throughout the isthmus.

To Bert

For Blanche and Sarah Blanche

Can we imagine, or should we, a position that speaks in tropes and walks in sensible shoes?

—Nancy Miller, Subject to Change, 76.

Beyond the theater, the question of costume reaches deep into the life of art and poetry, where fashion is at once preserved and overcome.

—Walter Benjamin, The Arcades Project [B1a,4], 65.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Illustrations..... | vii |
| Acknowledgements..... | viii |
| Introduction: Theorizing Fashion and the Poetics of Cultural Studies..... | 1 |
| One: <u>Poetisas</u> and Central American Literary Culture..... | 27 |
| Two: Eroticism and the Modern Woman..... | 96 |
| Three: Theosophy and Subversive Inscriptions..... | 156 |
| Four: <u>Mestizaje</u> and Custom Fitting the <u>Huipil</u> | 206 |
| Afterword: Fashioning Revolutions..... | 262 |
| Appendix A: Carmen Sobalvarro..... | 273 |
| Appendix B: Aura Rostand..... | 279 |
| Works Cited..... | 286 |

Illustrations

| | |
|--|-----|
| Society photo from <u>Pinceladas</u> | 72 |
| Portrait of Olivia de Wyld..... | 76 |
| Portrait of María Teresa Sánchez..... | 115 |
| Cover art of <u>Canción redonda</u> | 195 |
| Raquelita del Cid..... | 231 |
| Las nenas..... | 232 |
| Cover art of <u>Destellos del alma</u> | 235 |
| Barechested indigenous woman..... | 236 |
| Photo of Carmen Sobalvarro..... | 278 |
| Photo of Aura Rostand..... | 284 |
| Drawing of Aura Rostand..... | 285 |

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Introduction

Theorizing Fashion and the Poetics of Cultural Studies

In the present context of post-revolutionary Central America, historical scholarship has turned to the past in an effort to restore national memories of the times before and during the dictatorships that promoted often distorted versions of history and led to years of civil war. Many of these studies have identified the 1930s as a critical decade in Central America due to its nations' trying to defend and define themselves within the complex, often contradictory, forces of rapid modernization, militarization, military invasion, and economic imperialism.¹ Not only did several dictators—such as Jorge Ubico in Guatemala, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador, and Anastasio Somoza García in Nicaragua—consolidate their power during this time period, but the United Fruit Company (UFC) was at the height of its influence, and the U.S. military presence in Nicaragua reminded the entire region of its precarious independence.² As will be discussed in more detail in chapter 2, the heavy-handed economic policies of these regimes, as well as the wealth that accompanied the UFC and other foreign military and economic interests, signified a late-arriving, rapid modernization to Central America in the 1930s, in spite of the global economic depression that characterized the decade for the rest of the world. With increases in transportation and communication, Central American intellectuals were able to interact and share ideas with one another as never before, and many of the social policies and political ideals they developed were directly influenced by Mexico's Revolution and Peru's Aprista party. In fact, as we shall see in later

chapters, the ideals of class struggle and social reform and revolution played a strong role in politics at the local, national, and international levels. Many Central American intellectuals were part of the Partido Unionista Centroamericano, the Unionist political party that promoted a unified Central American state in order to combine wealth and to stave off unwanted foreign intervention. A loose international solidarity network also backed the revolutionary projects of Farabundo Martí in El Salvador and César Augusto Sandino in Nicaragua, both of which had tragic outcomes at local and national levels. Just as the names of these men would be invoked in El Salvador and Nicaragua's revolutionary parties in the 1970s, so did their followers—many of whom were indigenous and female—establish the tradition of activism that continues to play a role in Central American politics today.

In order to give a more balanced vision of national histories during this time period, scholars have increasingly sought out subaltern experiences, which include not only the stories of indigenous peoples and African descendents, but also of the illiterate, the working classes, children and women. With urbanization and an increasingly industrialized labor market, the experiences of all of these citizens, especially women, were also markedly changed during the 1930s. For the first time, women found themselves working outside the home and with access (if they could afford it) to a wide variety of imported consumer goods. As this study will demonstrate, media of all kinds—newspapers, magazines, bound books, radio, and cinema—were now made available to women, who not only read, listened to, and viewed these media outlets, but also (with the exception of film) actively participated

in their production as journalists and authors. At the same time, because of the diversity and diffusion of the media, distinctions between “high” literary culture, popular culture, and mass-mediated culture were blurred. These democratizing effects of modernization on the media mean that the study of poetry by Central American women—a genre that appeared in periodicals, books, and radio—can offer us a compelling insight into the region’s literary and intellectual cultures of this time period.

This dissertation, a literary and cultural study, participates in the recent work of Central Americanist scholars wishing to recover the region’s national histories that have been covered up or forgotten by years of dictatorships and civil wars. By looking at the cultural work of female poets of the 1930s, it contributes to the growing corpuses of both Central American women’s history and literary histories of the early twentieth century.³ Moreover, in that it privileges female writers who have been traditionally excluded from the Latin American literary circles, it contributes to what is known about literary culture at this time. By analyzing what has been characterized as “bad” poetry written by women, as well as their more experimental works and indigenista and political verse, I also hope to generate a conversation about the gender, class, and ethnic dynamics of taste formation in Central America, as well as who may populate the lettered city at any given time and through any given medium. In that many of the poets of this study—almost all of whom are unremembered—were also intellectuals and activists who wrote about and took practical steps towards social justice and women’s rights, it also restores these

women to the historical record. Among these socially and politically-committed poets were the Salvadorans, Claudia Lars (1899-1974), María Loucel (1899-1957), Emma Posada (1912-1997), Ámparo Casamahuapa (1910-1971), María de Baratta (1890-1978), Dina Palacios Martínez, and Mercedes Maití (1907-1974); Costa Ricans Maruja Luján Castro (?-1938), Fresia Brenes de Hilarova, Gris, and Emma Gamboa (1901-?); Guatemalans Magdalena Spínola (1886-1991), Angelina Acuña (1905-2006), Laura Rubio de Robles (1886-1975), Romelia Alarcón de Folgar (1900-1971), María del Pilar de García, Luz Valle (1896-1971), Malin de Echevers (1896-1974), and Marta Josefina Herrera; Nicaraguans Olga Solari Mongrío (1910-1974), María Teresa Sánchez ([1918]-1994), Carmen Sobalvarro (1908-194?), and Aura Rostand (a.k.a. María de la Selva, María Selva Escoto; 1905-1959); and Hondurans Clementina Suárez (1902-1991) and Fausta Ferrera (1891-1971).⁴

Influenced largely by the spiritual philosophy of theosophy and the Partido Unionista, these poets participated in shared intellectual spheres that sought to unite the five independent states of the isthmus.⁵ Following this philosophy, they also wrote and spoke out against the dictatorial regimes that plagued the region at the time. They promoted one another's work and enjoyed the support of other Latin American female poets, especially the increasingly important Chilean, Gabriela Mistral. As these poets were invariably middle and upper-class, they had the economic opportunities to embrace the "modern woman," a modern, liberated image of womanhood that brought empowering changes to many women's lives. It follows, then, that those women who were privileged with education, time to write,

and access to media outlets also helped to bring about the acceptance of modern roles for women into the region.

My dissertation will illustrate how these female poets—as both products and producers of their socio-historic contexts—participated critically in the cultural and political conversations of their day, often using their poetry to call for better working and living conditions for peasants, indigenous groups, and women in Central America. Their poetry also documents aspects of modernization brought to the isthmus and implicitly criticizes the often savage and anti-republican regimes of the dictators that dominated the region. Through their poems, as well as other activities, these poets strategically inserted themselves into public discourse, which not only contributed to the advancement of women’s rights in the region, but also testified to their key roles in early twentieth-century Central American history at large. For these reasons, their poetry deserves to be critically re-read (and, in most cases, uncovered) in the feminist tradition of recuperating literary foremothers and emphasizing their contributions to the literary canon and to cultural discourse.

Despite their contributions to Central American literary and cultural history, Francisco Albizúrez Palma sums up recent critical opinions regarding the contributions of these female poets when he writes in his preface to Poesía contemporánea de la América Central: “Si bien en la primera mitad del siglo veinte se advierten figuras como las de Claudia Lars, Clementina Suárez o Eunice Odio..., la poesía escrita por mujeres no era un fenómeno generalizado en Centro América” (34).⁶ Indeed, female intellectuals in Central America did not enjoy the strong voice

that the Seminar on Feminism and Culture in Latin America has told us they found in the Southern Cone region (2).⁷ Whereas poets such as Gabriela Mistral, Alfonsina Storni, and Juana de Ibarbourou began publishing as early as the 1910s and 20s, with rare exceptions Central American female poets, corresponding with the arrival of significant modernization to the isthmus, came a decade later to the stage. Because they were relative latecomers to the literary scene, some critics might be led to dismiss their writings as overdue or imitative. I argue, however, that their work is often not so simple and that their contributions to their specific socio-historic context make them pioneers in their own rights who deserve to be critically reclaimed as integral parts of Central American literary history, which has long celebrated its tradition of poetry.⁸ Moreover, as these poets represent a literate, economically privileged, yet still marginalized group, their special position reveals new aspects of the development of modern Central American intellectual culture, as well as the culture at large.

Given my emphasis on culture as I examine texts written by poetisas (the term, now considered belittling, that was still used for female poets in the 1930s), this project is as much as a cultural study as it is a literary one: my analyses combine close readings of poetic texts with readings of other, non-poetic (often non-literary) texts, and I value the cultural implications of these readings. By blending cultural studies with close readings of poetry, this dissertation inevitably enters the current debates on the direction of literary studies as demonstrated in Marjorie Perloff's 2006 Presidential Address at the MLA, during which she protests the apparent

waning of traditional literary studies in the academy as they have become increasingly interdisciplinary. Unlike Perloff, I do not find this interdisciplinary trend in literary studies to be threatening: in fact, I believe that it deepens our analytical toolkit for approaching texts and gives us new ways to talk about poetry's cultural value as a literary construct. For example, a multi-disciplinary approach frames analytical questions for me in chapter 1 that allow me to examine the cultural and what critic Jean Shelley Rubin calls the "emotional" work of the text (Songs 7). In chapter 2, this approach enables me to use scopophilia—the filmic term for the pleasure in looking—for reading erotic poetry. In this way, we can begin to value poetisa texts in ways that traditional literary studies may not have allowed us to do. Cultural studies also permit us to view a text in a more nuanced version of its social and historical context and to see the text as having been formed by and actively forming this context. By doing so, a cultural studies approach is particularly helpful when studying and teaching a culture that is not one's own because it requires attention to social and historical factors that one might take for granted in one's own culture. In this way, it both helps the critic to avoid making cultural comparisons that could be inappropriate and guides her in forming questions about how texts work in culturally-specific situations.

In a recent issue of the PMLA, Stathis Gourgouris contests Perloff's address, arguing that poetry is by its very nature interdisciplinary and culturally bounding in that poiein, the Greek verb for making poetry, means "to create." He explains:

To write Greek poems is thus posed as a question of reality [...] To write Greek poems has nothing to do with writing them in a specific form, in the Greek language, or as elements of a Greek poetic-political imaginary. Rather, it is a matter of being attuned to the elusive details of history in the making. It is to understand that making history is the most profound meaning of poiein. (227)

According to this critic's vision, "poiein pertains to a radical sense of the present" (227), which I interpret as something akin to Raymond Williams's "structure of feeling," or a textual indicator of the lived experience of a society at a particular moment (132-33).

With this meaning of poiein, poetry can also be seen as functioning as a discourse in the Foucauldian sense of the word, in that it is a kind of knowledge or sign system that constructs both the speaking subject and her experience of reality, as well as relations of power within that reality.⁹ For example, we can look at the formation of poetry as a discourse by analyzing how different poems or poetic utterances share referents, formal characteristics, specific language or themes.¹⁰ In Discipline and Punish, Foucault argues that, because power is derived from knowledge, discourse maintains power through exclusion (198). In other words, members of a group in power maintain their power by communicating in a shared discourse, or language and statements exclusive to that group. Thus, when early Central American female poets began to take part in discourses once available only to male intellectuals, they effectively broke down the exclusion and power once

enjoyed by the masculinist lettered city. By including their poetry, a form of discourse traditionally exercised by male writers, in print media, women began not only to produce, but also to disseminate, their newfound discursive power.

Moreover, by writing poetry that engaged in themes of eroticism, theosophy, Central American Unionism, mestizaje, indigenism, and social revolution, these female poets further undermined the male exclusivity of the lettered city in that they were participating in other conversations once primarily privy to male intellectual circles.

Like poetry, fashion can be understood both as a cultural and social discourse and as a mode of representation acting on cultural and social discourses. As a system of dress (or, as early fashion theorist Georg Simmel explains it: “the social forms, the clothes, the aesthetic judgments, the whole style in which human beings express themselves” 190), fashion not only represents one’s self, but also the cultural values and social ideals that inform individual identity at any given moment.

Fashion has also often been said to be an indicator of class. Simmel theorized a “trickle-down effect” of fashion: “Just as soon as the lower strata begin to appropriate [the upper strata’s] style—and thereby overstep the demarcation line which the upper strata have drawn [...]—so the upper strata turn away from this fashion and adopt a new one, which in turn differentiates them from the broad masses” (190). Fashion thus delineates who holds social power and who does not, and in this way it can be related to the concept of the lettered city, Ángel Rama’s term for the metaphorical Latin American city that acts as the nexus of written discourse and political and social power.

In that fashion became an important indicator of social power and wealth in modern, industrialized, urban society, it can be compared to literacy and the political exercise of the written word in modern Latin America. Rama writes of the changes that modernization brought into the lettered city, whose population grew unstable with the diffusion of newspapers and leftist discourses that sought to empower peasants, workers, and students by encouraging them to use print media to participate in civic debates (71, 77-8). Although Rama does not mention women as occupants of either the real or lettered cities, archival research and women's literary history demonstrate that, at the turn of the twentieth century, female writers were also beginning to secure a place—however tentative and periphery—within the city limits. Thus, at the turn of the twentieth century, letters—like fashion—became more democratized through mass production and marketing, which, as we shall see in chapter 1, Central American female poets used to their advantage in creating communities of readers and disseminating their voices. As never before, the printed word and fashion offered people opportunities to climb the social ladder and led to the intermixing of the lettered city with the real city. Rama writes that this convergence between the real and lettered cities also resulted in the redesign of national identity in letters so that it better corresponded with modern social realities (94-7). These realities, in turn, rendered a more politicized and secularized lettered city as politicians (especially propagandistic dictators) strove to consolidate their power through control of the media (118).

In the 1930s in Central America, the lettered city was still largely dominated by white men of the middle and upper classes who had both the access to an education and the leisure time to devote themselves to intellectual life. In that these men had power over the media, they also controlled the circulation of ideas and who could participate in their intellectual conversations. To this end, the lettered city shared something in common with fashion in that it functioned as a bastion of gender, race, and class division. As has been noted above, Simmel viewed fashion as a classist enterprise, but he also wrote that it had “the double function of holding a given social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others” (189). As a discourse, fashion—like writing and certain cultural topics for the lettered city—inscribes power for the intellectual elite by excluding other members of society from its ranks. As such, it is not surprising that fashion theory is a growing field that has been increasingly accepted as a branch of cultural studies that presents scholars with a fresh, multi-disciplinary approach to analyzing cultural representations.

Poetry and fashion have more in common than acting as forms of discourse. According to The American Heritage Dictionary, the word fashion as a verb means “to give shape or form to; make” (def. 1). Similarly, the word poetics is derived from the Greek word poiesis, which The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics defines as “a making, a process” (“Poetics” 934b). Poiesis is related to the Greek verb, poiein, which Gourgouris defines as “working on matter, shape, or form” (225). In both senses, poetry has to do directly with shaping, forming, making, creating, fashioning. Perhaps this shared meaning between fashion and

poetry explains why poetry often takes on sartorial metaphors. For instance, Argentinian poet Tamara Kamenszain compares literary texts to pieces of embroidery or sewing: “Ya es casi parte del sentido común comparar al texto con un tejido, a la construcción del relato con una costura, al modo de adjetivar un poema con la acción de bordar” (77). Indeed, as Roland Barthes points out, the word text is derived from textus, meaning “woven” (“From Work” 76). In a different sense, in medieval and Golden Age Spain, to refer to a poet as a sastre, or tailor, meant that he was a bad poet (Reyes 363). Playing on the link between women and sewing, Kamenszain argues that women are predisposed to experimental writing: “Esta posibilidad femenina de espiar en las costuras para ver las construcciones por su reverso abre a la mujer, en su relación con la escritura, el camino de la vanguardia” (81). This gendered relation between writing and sewing will play a large role in my theorizing women’s poetry through fashion.

Like poetry, which plays on unexpected, often compounded, meanings when referents and signifiers are placed in new relationships to one another, fashion also offers its critics what Elizabeth Wilson calls “its tantalizing and slippery essence,” or uncertainty in terms of what and how it communicates (22). It is perhaps this ambiguity, or “play” (in both the semantic and recreational senses of the word), that results in one more commonality between the poetic and fashion text: pleasure.¹¹ Wilson reminds her readers that pleasure is central to the fashion experience and that it has often been overlooked by cultural theorists, such as Baudrillard (19). Other literary theorists, notably Barthes in The Pleasure of the Text, have repeatedly tried

to conceptualize and qualify the ineffable aesthetic experience of pleasure.¹² On a personal note, it is the pleasure that I find in both fashion and poetry that has brought me to this dissertation project, and I hope that I am able to convey this joy to others through my work here.

Like poetry written by women in 1930s Central America, fashion has also carried pejorative gendered associations with modernity and the rise of consumer capitalism. It follows, then, that fashion mediated the formation of the modern woman at the beginning of the twentieth century. Writing about visual culture and the formation of the modern woman in Mexico, for example, Joanne Herschfield states, “One of the transnational discourses that shaped la chica moderna was that of fashion” (44). Wilson traces such associations to the nineteenth century in the published ideas of Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class, in which he argues that fashion is an aspect of conspicuous leisure and that women must dress fashionably as evidence of her husband’s wealth (17). In 1904, Simmel theorized women’s “natural” attraction to fashion “out of the weakness of the social position to which women [are] condemned” (196). In The Arcades Project, which took form throughout the 1930s, Walter Benjamin also commented on “the incomparable nose which the feminine collective has” for fashion (64). Reflecting on Karl Marx’s theories on fetish commodities in Das Kapital, Benjamin observed in the same work that “fashion prescribed the ritual by which the fetish Commodity wished to be worshipped” (8).¹³ More recently, Rita Felski has connected negative personifications of women to the rise of modernity in The Gender of Modernity. She

writes that, “In an intellectual tradition extending from the Frankfurt School to the recent work of Jean Baudrillard, the discourses on commodity fetishism and the tyranny of the sign reveal a persistently gendered subtext” (63). This subtext casts women not only as the ultimate consumers of fashionable consumer goods, but also of sentimental literature. Felski writes that at the beginning of the twentieth century, previously value-neutral terms such as ‘sentimental,’ ‘melodramatic,’ and ‘romantic’ acquired increasingly negative, feminine, and old-fashioned connotations as labels for those texts which sought refuge from the critical understanding of reality in the form of beautiful illusions and exaggerated displays of feeling. Thus, while women gained a significant hold on the literary marketplace, the aesthetic qualities associated with femininity were simultaneously downgraded and trivialized. (117; my emphasis)

In chapter 1, I will examine more deeply the negative stereotypes associated with female poets, which included discourses on fashion, that implied that their writing was passé, or not in keeping with the more “virile” and experimental styles, which were considered to be more innovative and of literary value.

As Wilson observes at the beginning of her book, “because fashion is constantly denigrated, the serious study of fashion has had repeatedly to justify itself” (15). Similarly feminized and unappreciated as a lesser art form, poetisa texts from the early twentieth century in Central America have been critically neglected for almost a century. Nevertheless, as Gilles Lipovetsky points out, perspectives on

fashion have changed, and it is “no longer an aesthetic embellishment, a decorative accessory to collective life, it is the key to the entire edifice” (27). Just as fashion ranges from mass-produced, ready-to-wear garments to the haut couture, poetry published by women in the 1930s is diverse in terms of theme, craft, form, and intended audience. As gendered texts representative of both “high” and mass-mediated cultures, early poetry written by women complicates key cultural discourses, thus offering a broader view of Central American identity, in particular that of women and a growing middle class, at this time.¹⁴ Similarly, fashion and its theory can illuminate these poetic cultural studies by helping us to uncover shared meanings and conventions of representation that contribute to gendered, classed, and racialized concepts of literary production and taste generated by the Central American lettered city.

As a cultural study of women’s poetry of the past, my research has relied heavily on archival and historical investigation, both of which will play large roles in the chapters to follow. In order to establish cultural and historical context, each chapter (beginning with chapter 2) will first look at a non-poetic text before engaging in close readings of poems by selected authors. By including non-poetic, often non-literary texts culled from film, hygiene and behavior manuals, radio broadcasts, photography, and narrative, I have been able to examine how poetry entered into key cultural conversations of the time period, as well as to demonstrate how certain poetry was received (as “high” literary forms or as a more popular or mass-mediated cultural texts). Because different poets and their texts took part in these

conversations in different ways and to different degrees, these chapters do not have a set number of case studies. Instead, I allow poets and their texts the space they need to demonstrate their cultural work. I do try in each chapter to highlight what was happening in each of the five Central American republics with respect to the themes or discourses being analyzed. Although Central America as a region follows similar trends throughout the 1930s, each nation and its writers experienced different historical events, which in turn can result in country-specific poetic form and content.

In the first chapter, I address the stereotypes of “bad” poetry—which is typically characterized as outdated, overly emotional, melodramatic, sentimental, or romantic poetry—often associated with poetisas. This chapter analyzes the power dynamics of the masculine lettered city and how it used a discourse of fashion to exclude female poets, who began publishing in the 1930s in unprecedented numbers. In something is akin to what Beatriz Sarlo has called the “feminine strategy of duplicity,” it also examines a strategic use of poetisa aesthetics by female poets in order to gain acceptance into the lettered city; by accepting some of the stereotypes associated with poetisa verse and playing on them, these poets both accepted and challenged phallocentrism (232). To this end, this chapter analyzes how Spínola and Lars used a poetisa aesthetic as a mask with which to veil more political ideas that would have been unacceptable by mere poetisas with no clout in the print media. It also examines the ways in which Sobalvarro’s poetisa verse about Sandino created an acceptably “feminine” way for Central American women to engage in political

conversations. This chapter also discusses the establishment of women's literary communities through magazines, such as Nosotras, and the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral, which encouraged women to read, write, and publish poetry. With an analysis of the collections of De Wyld, which included tourist and society photographs, we see how these communities affected the marketing of poetry by women. Through these outlets, women secured a part of the literary market, which was fundamental to their being taken seriously by editors and thereby securing a toehold in the lettered city.

Chapter 2 abandons poetisa aesthetics in favor of themes of free love and eroticism that poets such as Bertrand (a.k.a. Alma Fiori), Suárez, and Solari capitalized upon in order to inscribe their identities as modern women. Their shocking verse did not occur in a vacuum, however, but in the context of Central America's rapid modernization in the 1930s and the concurrent unleashing of the modern woman. The chapter begins with a discussion of the Costa Rican film, El retorno, which was considered so risqué that, soon after its 1930 release, it was confiscated and hidden in a vault in San José, only to be uncovered and restored in 1990. A critical reading of El retorno's scandalous dance scene introduces the concept of scopophilia, or the pleasure in viewing, which also works as an analytical tool with which to approach the erotic poetry written by women.

Chapter 3 begins with Carlos Wyld Ospina's (Guatemala, 1891-1956) novel, La gringa. Published in 1936, this narrative demonstrates a gendered anxiety about modernity in relation to theosophy, an esoteric spiritual movement that sought a

universal truth in all of the world's major religions. Having recently identified theosophy as a definitive cultural discourse in early twentieth century Central America, Guatemalan historian Marta Elena Casaús Arzú proves that theosophy was practiced by most Central American intellectuals as late as the 1930s. She demonstrates how the movement's ideals of gender and racial equality shaped intellectual campaigns of social and political resistance throughout the region. I argue that, as a fashionable discourse, theosophy allows us to re-read texts that were once considered hegemonic (such as La gringa and the poetisa poetry of Lars, Ochoa Velásquez, and Acuña) with new insight, creating possible politically subversive readings. In this way, theosophy extends Central America's tradition of protest literature and gives us a means to re-evaluate once overlooked writers and texts in new ways.

In chapter 4, western style gives way to (or appropriates) indigenous fashion with poems by women that feature the huipil, a Mesoamerican woman's embroidered blouse, whose sewn symbols can also be read as texts that tell stories and indicate the wearer's community.¹⁵ The poetry of De Wyld, Lars, and Baratta uses the huipil to signify indigeneity to differing ideological ends. Analyses of their uses of the huipil demonstrate the complexities of mestizaje and how it factored both critically and uncritically in imagining the Central American nations. The chapter begins with the text of a radio-broadcasted home economics lesson for indigenous women, which opens the discussion of mestizaje as both an assimilating discourse of "modernizing" the indigenous poor and as a possibility for utopia by embracing

cultural differences. By participating in the conversation of mestizaje, the female poets of this chapter not only made their poetic content relevant by taking part in one of the most pivotal intellectual debates of the day, but they also engender diverse poetic projects ranging from political solidarity to exoticism and nation-building.

Taken together, the ideas presented in these chapters lay the groundwork for further investigations of female poets and their contributions to the Central American lettered city, which should include a critical look at their texts' participation in the political projects of feminism and social revolution throughout the isthmus, as well as the roles that their children's verse played in engendering the nation.¹⁶ As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, as a literary and cultural study, this dissertation also takes part in a larger project of piecing back together the history of Central America before the decades of dictatorships and wars. Benjamin recognized the importance of fashion in reconstructing history. Reflecting on the poetry of Baudelaire, he writes, "The 'things' that have gone out of fashion have become inexhaustible containers of memories" ([J71,2] 354). Theorist Peter Wollen elaborates on Benjamin's insightful connection of fashion to memory, writing what he believes would have been his conclusion to The Arcades Project had he finished it:

This process of historical remembering and interpreting was the precondition of any future liberation from the constraints that the grip of the past had placed on our understanding of the present and thus on the possibility of future action. [Benjamin] understood that the

sensuous and poetic aspects [of fashion], the aesthetic and psychological aspects of costume, should not and cannot be discounted. Fashion displays both an object lesson in commodity culture and a possibility of messianic redemption. (142)

In a similar way, the Central American poetisas and their texts, considered out-of-fashion and cast away by literary scholarship, contain inexhaustible memories and unique insights into this region's intellectual culture of the 1930s that, as we will see, would also serve as a foundation for Central America's rich tradition of poetry. By recovering their contributions to and conflicts with the lettered city, we can perhaps begin to understand some of the roots of present-day power dynamics in Central America and share in the empowerment of these women's poetic interventions.

Notes

¹ See, for example, the work of Gould, Casaús-Arzú, Whisnant, Tilley, Lindo-Fuentes (et.al.), Grieb, Grandin, Gobat, Almeida, Taracena Arriola, and the following anthologies: Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation-State (Ed. Chomsky and Lauria-Santiago) and Memorias del mestizaje (Ed. Euraque, Gould, Hale).

² As 1944 marked the end of the dictatorships of Martínez and Ubico, as well as the foreseeable end of World War II, I have used this year to bracket the end of my study. The year 1929, with which I begin my study, marks the beginning of the global financial depression that would characterize the 1930s as a decade.

³ Presently the University of Costa Rica's Centro de Investigación en Identidad y Cultural Latinoamericanas (CIICLA), the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica and other European and North American institutions are collaborating in the three-year project, "Hacia una Historia de las Literaturas Centroamericanas," the objective of which is to rectify the lack of a unified Central American literary history. The project has solicited the contributions of scholars worldwide to predetermined, comprehensive areas of Central American literary history (See "Universidad de Costa Rica" and "Documento."). In July 2008, the first volume of the six-volume project, titled, Intersecciones y transgresiones. Propuestas para una historiografía literaria en Centroamérica, will be introduced at the IX Congreso Centroamericano de Historia at the University of Costa Rica ("F&G Editores").

⁴ As a note of convention, I will give countries and dates of poets when first referring to them in each chapter unless a poet's dates are unknown.

Other female poets whose biographies or texts do not readily suggest activism. From El Salvador, these poets include Alice Lardé (1895-1983), Mercedes de Muñoz Ciudad Real (a.k.a. Mercedes Viaud Rochac; 1910-?), Lilián Serpas (1905-1985), Lydia Valiente (1900-1976), Mercedes Quintero (1898-1924), Margarita Gamboa de Cuevas, Elisa Huezo de Paredes (a.k.a. Esperanza Ponsell), and Tula van Severen de Chacón (1905-?). From Costa Rica: Ifigenia, Dora Gotay, Gertrudis Montalbán, Amelia Ceide, Myriam Francis, Esmerelda Colombiana, and Blanca Milanés. From Guatemala: Olivia de Wyld, Olga Violeta Luna de Marroquín, Martha Mencés de Aparicio, Clemencia Morales Tinoco, Blanca de los Ríos, Annie Valladares Sáenz, Dolores Adamé, Annie Flefil, Blanca Perla Estrada Castañeda, Sara Genser, Lola Villacorta Vidaurre, Margarita Leal y Rubio (a.k.a. Griselda Montes de Oca, Mario Bitullarreaga), Trinidad de Camacho, Amanda Castillo R., A. de la Roca, A. Rodríguez Saravia (a.k.a. Adriana Saravia de Palarea), Margarita de Azori, Lucía Martínez Sobral de Tejada, Carmen Alicia Cadilla, Herminia Bermúdez L., Matilde Vela S., Estella Márquez (a.k.a. Clemencia Rubio v. de Herrarte; 1896-1959), Herlinda D. Pinto, María Antonieta Freyre, Celia Treviño, and Margot Lainfiesta. From Nicaragua: Mary Ortega del a C., Carmen de Mantilla, and Zoila Luz López. From Honduras: Ángela Ochoa Velásquez (a.k.a. Esmeralda, 1886-1969), Victoria Bertrand (a.k.a. Alma Fiori; 1907-1952), Olimpia Varela y

Varela (1899-1986), Mercedes Laínez de Blanco (1900-1976), Juanita Zelaya (1908-1934); Margarita Romero (a.k.a. Mirta Rinza; 1917-1997), Argentina Díaz Lozano (1912-?), Visitación Padilla, Paca Navas de Miralda (a.k.a. Flor de Lis; 1900-1971), Ada María Navas, Amelia Arita, Guillermina Cerrato Flores, and de Falk.

The value of listing all of these poets—whether they are featured later in my study or not—lies in the fact that, by publishing, these women considered themselves to be poets. Also, the paucity of precise dates in their biographies demonstrates how little critical attention female poets of this era have received. There are certainly other female poets who published during the 1930s who are not included in this list, offering many possibilities for future scholars.

⁵ The five independent states to which I am referring are Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. Historians John Booth, Christine Wade and Thomas Walker write that “Panama, though often lumped with other countries of the region, is often technically outside Central America” due to a lack of a shared cultural, economic and political history with Central America (4). It is in part for this reason that I have chosen not to include Panamanian María Olimpia de Obaldía (1891-1991) in this study.

⁶ Tellingly, this quote comes from the “nota necesaria” about the feminine voice that Albizúrez Palma tacked onto the end of his preface.

⁷ The relatively late arrival of modernization to Central American and slow economic development in the region has often resulted in the critical neglect of its

literature and literary culture in general, especially from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 2 of Beverley and Zimmerman, Jaramillo Levi's introduction to his anthology of the Central American short story, Ramirez's introduction to his short story anthology, and Ramirez's Balcanes y volcanes all discuss the critical neglect of Central American letters due to slow economic development in the region. Important exceptions to this paucity of literary criticism are Lara-Martínez, Gold, Pineda de Gálvez, Horan, Arias, and Gonzalez Huguet, among others, whose attentive work on indigenist and women's literary histories of the early twentieth century have made significant contributions to writing a literary history of this era.

⁸ In Nicaragua, for example, there exists the popular expression that everyone is a poet whether he knows how to read and write or not. In recent years, testimonial poetries have borne witness to the atrocities brought by the civil wars. The voices of several female poets, including Gioconda Belli (Nicaragua, b. 1948), Daisy Zamora (Nicaragua, b. 1950), Ana María Rodas (Guatemala, b. 1937) and Claribel Alegría (El Salvador, b. 1924), rose to the fore during these years, often giving gendered accounts of armed conflict and political resistance.

⁹ In Poetry as Discourse, Anthony Easthope engages Althusser and writes that poetry as a linguistic discourse necessarily involves ideology and that poetry is therefore always "part of a social formation defined historically" (19, 21).

¹⁰ In Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault describes discourse formation as the dispersion of groups of statements that are related in terms of sharing the same referent, form, systems of concepts, and/or themes (38).

¹¹ Derrida writes about epistemic structures' limits on semantic "play," which arrest movement between the signifier and referent by stabilizing a referent, fixing it in place (83). Wittgenstein capitalizes on semantic "play" in his language games, which result in a kind of recreational "play."

¹² Kristeva's and Irigaray's work on jouissance has been central to feminist literary theory.

¹³ Fashion continues to be analyzed in terms of gender analysis and capitalism consumerism, especially with respect to the predominantly female workforce of clothing sweatshops and maquiladoras. See, for example, Barnard's "Fashion: Identity and Difference" and "Production and Consumption."

¹⁴ I owe my thinking here to Robert McKee Irwin, who writes in his introduction to Mexican Masculinities that the goal of his book

is not to attain an impossible goal of achieving complete and accurate representation, but to provide a variety of alternatives to the hegemonic visions of Mexican masculinity of Mexico's letrados, a Foucauldian web of gender discourses that complicate and contradict each other and themselves and represent a broader view of Mexicanness than could the canon by itself. (xv)

¹⁵ Nelson indicates that the huipil no longer indicates that wearer's community, as it has become fashionable for indigenous women to wear huipiles of other communities, which she also interprets as a form of political subversion (199-201). In the 1930s, however, one community's huipil design would not have been routinely worn by women of another community.

¹⁶ Children's verse written by Central American female poets is abundant and implies such different analytical work that I practically disregarded it all together in researching this project.

Chapter 1

Poetisas and Central American Literary Culture

If fashion both gives expression to the impulse towards equalization and individualization, as well as to the allure of imitation and conspicuousness, this perhaps explains why it is that women, broadly speaking, adhere especially strongly to fashion.

—George Simmel, “The Philosophy of Fashion”

(1904) 196.

Long before Cortázar wrote about the “lector hembra” in Rayuela (1968), Latin American literary culture experienced a polemic of reading taste according to gendered stereotypes. Critic Robert McKee Irwin notes these stereotypes as he writes about the gendered debates over “virile” versus “effeminate” literature during the Mexican Revolution (116-86). Not only was “virile” literature meant to perpetuate state-sanctioned, masculinist nationalism of the Revolution, he notes, but it also set itself against the passé literary discourse of modernismo, characterized with disdain as an “effeminate” mode of classist, Europeanized dandies representative of the Porfiriato.¹ In Performing Women, Unruh explains how a similar gendered conversation about experimental writing that took place in Argentina, where vanguard writing was considered masculine in comparison to formal lyricism, “a quality ascribed at the time to the work of (women) poetisas” (11). Central American literary circles, eager to keep up with the rest of Latin America and the world, also participated in this gendered language. For example,

Nicaragua's group of young vanguard writers, the Anti-Academia, wrote in its "Primer manifesto: Ligera exposición y proclama de la Anti-Academia nicaragüense" (1931) that it valued experimental, nationalist literature over the imported style of bourgeois literature, which they ironically dubbed "rubendarismo".² In their "Prólogo solo" they accused the young ladies of Nicaragua of trying to be "modernas con el falso modernismo extranjerizado" and recommended that they seek out the "nuevas rutas que deberá tomar la verdadera mujer nicaragüense" (28). Whatever these "new routes" were to be, they surely did not include the imitations of Bécquer and Darío that peppered Managua's weekly national magazine, El Gráfico. "New routes" also likely did not entail writing in women's social clubs, such as the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral, which, as we shall see, often followed conventional models of sentimental salon culture. Whatever these writers meant by "new routes," their manifesto speaks out against what they saw as an outmoded modernista poetics, which they negatively characterize as both feminine and foreign. For the Anti-Academia, experimental poetics—implicitly gendered as masculine—were the only true expression of Nicaraguan nationalism. Together, these debates can be read as part of a larger Latin American and global expression of gendered anxieties that rose to the fore as a result of modernization and women's increased independence and visibility in the public sphere.³

In addition to the gendered literary conversations of the early twentieth century, associations of inferior poetry with female poets—commonly referred to at that time as poetisas—worked to perpetuate sexist attitudes that inhibited women

from becoming part of the male-dominated lettered city.⁴ In her study of Clementina Suárez (Honduras, 1902-1991), Janet Gold defines poetisas as “women who knew their place, who wrote childlike poems that the male literary establishment...patronizingly found charming” (Clementina 88). By not overstepping their boundaries as women writing in a man’s world, poetisas were able to find acceptance and readership by sticking to socially determined “feminine” themes and conventions. A poetisa aesthetic, then, was often characterized by drippy sentimentality, confessional tones, subjectivity projected onto Nature, narcissism, dramatic displays of emotion, meditations on the sublime gifts of poetry, and creative melancholy: all themes and techniques that were beginning to be seen as anachronistic after the twentieth-century advent of the avant-gardes.

Recently, studies on early female writers have tried to explain why such sexist perceptions have persisted. Unruh, who also observes the poetisa phenomenon, notes that “numerous reviews of women’s poetry and prose in mass media and forums... reinforced [poetisas] for writing in self-abnegating modes and chastised those who did otherwise for writing like men” (Performing 11). Rachel Phillips suggests that female writers may have had a hand in their own marginalization. She explains that, because they typically banded together and promoted one another’s work across Latin America, female poets formed networks that may also have “encouraged that atmosphere of segregation—the ‘sub-species’ mentality—which was in the long run prejudicial to their status as individual artists” (8). Phillips thus states that contemporary social conditions were to blame for the

lack of originality in poetisa writing: “women had enough barriers to deal with than breaking through artistic conventions” (2). She also proposes that something akin to a Stockholm (“Battered Wife”) Syndrome was at play, pointing out that female poets such as Juana de Ibarbourou demonstrated “passive acceptance of prevailing circumstances, and identification with the oppressor, in this case society at large” (9). In addition to these reasons, many early female poets also have internalized social prejudices and expectations, reproducing on the page and in life a poetisa aesthetic. The concept of the poetisa acted as a self-fulfilling label both by adding to commonly accepted social impressions of female writers and by shaping how female writers of the early twentieth century imagined themselves on and off the page.

Socialized as poetisas, female writers had to overcome numerous obstacles that blocked their admittance to the world of letters that persist into the present century. Throughout the twentieth century, misogynist misconceptions about women’s writing were the norm. Even today, poetry written by women is routinely dismissed by the literary establishment. In 2007 Nicaraguan critic and literary historian Jorge Eduardo Arellano referred to much of women’s poetry as “subliteratura” and “cursilería” (personal interview). He complained, “abunda la poesía mala escrita por mujeres... ninguna mujer poeta nica puede escribir un soneto”.⁵ Because of such enduring poetisa stereotypes, in this chapter I will address the issue of “bad” poetry associated with poetisas as part of a gendered cultural discourse that acts as a barrier to women wishing to enter the lettered city. This chapter will not only examine these obstacles, but also how female poets

maneuvered the negative stereotypes associated with the poetisa aesthetic in order ultimately to circumvent their marginalization from intellectual circles of power in Central America. By studying how different poetisas marketed themselves and were received, we will see how the lettered city has historically marginalized female poets by accusing them first of being poetic imitators and second of being culturally inferior as harbingers of a gendered middlebrow aesthetic. In this process, we will also see how many poetisas, such as those who belonged to what I call the Nosotras Generation of Guatemala, made this marginalization work in their favor by creating a community of female readers that, for economic reasons, could not be ignored by mainstream print media, thus leading to the publishing of more female writers by editors who traditionally would not have considered their work. Finally, we will see how two poets, Magdalena Spínola (Guatemala, 1886-1975) and Claudia Lars (El Salvador, 1899-1974), each used a poetisa aesthetic in their early work to veil political criticism that otherwise would have made their writing risky under the dictatorships of their countries.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, women's roles began to change throughout the world as women demanded suffrage and began to occupy the public sphere as never before both in politics and in the workplace. It was not until the 1930s that Central American women began to experience first-hand these changes. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, the image of the modern woman arrived in Central America from Hollywood and other foreign cinemas, ready for work outside the home as a teacher, secretary or journalist. It was not uncommon, for example, to see

classified ads in urban newspapers for “señoritas con buenas recomendaciones” who also had typing skills and were looking for employment. In that these jobs often revolved around redaction or teaching reading and writing, it is not surprising that women of this time period also began publishing literature in unprecedented numbers. According to Claribel Alegría, during her childhood in El Salvador, women who wrote poetry were scorned by society, and less talented female poets were the object of much ridicule (personal interview). They continued to write, however, because they had a need to express themselves. An increase in local newspaper circulation and inexpensive printing options allowed them to put their voices in print as never before, even though they risked public scorn to do so in a society that resented and resisted their acting outside of a conservative gendered behavior code.⁶ In fact, in the case of Guatemala, which will be examined more in depth later, women literally altered the periodical landscape in the 1930s by adding a women’s page to the national newspaper, El Imparcial, in 1935, and by introducing three women’s magazines edited by women to newsstands: Nosotras (1932-1942; Alma America (1934-1945), and Azul (1940-1944).

Despite growing opportunities for women to publish, conservative gender codes continued to discourage women’s literary expression in the 1930s. A backlash against the modern woman can be seen by the number of comportment manuals and articles against women’s liberation (social, economic, political or sexual) that tried in vain to put the modern woman back in her place. In 1927 Nicaraguan Pedro Joaquín

Cuadra Chamorro dedicated his novel El manto de Jesús to his daughters, explaining the following:

Decir “modas” es hablar de la mujer; y como han llegado a tal extremo las exageraciones de las modernas, y tengo la prematura preocupación de padre de una familia femenina..., es natural que mi mente creadora haya sido solicitada por el tema delicado de la moda en complicación con las costumbres piadosamente cristianas.

Producto de esa gestación es esta novelita que os presento con el nombre de “El manto de Jesús,” único capaz de cubrir santamente lo que las modas mal ideas quieren descubrir sin pudor. (i)

Cuadra’s other novel, Las dos mujeres, o el arma de la buena esposa (n.d.), depicts a similar patriarchal vision of how the good wife should behave. In 1928, Guatemalan José Vásquez wrote in the prologue to his behavior manual that his book was meant to supplement the lack of an “escuela del hogar” in Central America (iii). These works make it clear that there was a conservative reaction to the modern woman, suggesting that she threatened traditional mores on the isthmus about how a lady should behave. Gold cites several such articles from the Tegucigalpa Magazine in the 1920s (76-7). Guatemala’s El Imparcial and Nicaragua’s El Gráfico frequently contained articles, cartoons, and spoofs depicting silly or overbearing images of the modern woman. In El Imparcial, for example, a 1929 article featured several photographs of women with bobbed hair next to portraits of men, with the headline: “Los bigotes son el único medio varonil para distinguirse de las mujeres” (1). In

1936, Héctor Ovidio Rodas (sporting a moustache in the photo accompanying his article) argued in Nosotras that the modern woman was antithetical to Guatemalan nationalism and was “un craso error social, muy vecino a lo antisocial” (“La mujer moderna y la mujer guatemalteca” n.pag.). Gendered negotiations of modernity, whether or in favor of or against the modern woman, also frequently characterized editorial content in Central America of the early twentieth century.

The conservative gender codes of the era, which insisted that women should behave like “ladies” and not aspire to be men, carried over to literature. For example, 1937 critic Carlos Martínez Durán argued that women should write as women: “La poesía femenina debe crear sus formas de expresión para que el contenido ideológico armonice con el lenguaje, evitando así ciertas impudicias impropias del alma femenina” (3). In this vein, the sentimental Guatemalan declaimer, Griselda Montes de Oca, was valued by the press for her femininity, which was seen as nostalgic of the time before the modern woman: “es grato notar...un deseo de volver ya los ojos hacia las cosas del espíritu. El gesto es de abandonar el ambiente frívolo, deportivo, cinesco, para escuchar como en otros tiempos la clara voz del arte” (Méndez 5).⁷ By thus encouraging a “feminine” aesthetic distinct from that of men or modern women interested in sports, politics, or film (traditionally male or unintellectual, lower-class activities), critics effectively marginalized women from the lettered city, maintaining this privileged space of high, literary culture for men.

The conservative gender code also impacted early Central American poetry written by women by reinforcing the imitative, overdone sentimentality stereotypical of poetisa work in the early twentieth century. As a result, we see how the often sentimental literary movements of romanticismo, modernismo, and posmodernismo—considered by literary history to have been out of fashion in the 1930s and 40s—have converged negatively on the figure of the poetisa in Central American literary history. With the exception of posmodernismo (which, as will be discussed later, is often used by critics to classify—and marginalize—female writers of the period), traditional literary histories have typically dismissed the presence of romanticismo and modernismo in the 1930s and 40s as out of date or as unrepresentative of “high,” vanguard literature. Only recently have cultural studies critics such as Irwin begun to reconsider late manifestations and the ongoing popularity of these movements as indicators of popular, gendered taste.⁸ In light of the popularity of these movements in these later decades, the poetisa’s reputation for merely imitating these movements is false: they were, in fact, participating in the still fashionable poetic discourses of their day, shared by men and women, alike.

Significantly, critics of the 1930s and 40s often couched their criticism of women’s writing in terms of imitation. For example, Martínez warned against “poetisas de tercer grado que imitan servilmente lo que el hombre ha hecho,” explaining that “las formas de la poesía han sido masculinas y por eso resulta difícil e inconveniente para la mujer verter su intuición y sensibilidad propias en modelos

que no le pertenecen” (3). On a similar note, Sidonia Carmen Rosenbaum—a woman!—wrote in 1945:

Although it is known that feminine literature flourishes and thrives in periods of stylistic freedom and emotivity—such as Romanticism—it is also true that, as women are not creative, as they tend to follow patterns rather than form them, they must wait until the literary mode crystallizes before attempting to emulate the work of the innovators.

(4)

Writing about female members of the European avant-garde who received similarly imitation-based criticism, critic Christine Brooke-Rose comments, “women are rarely considered seriously a part of a movement when it is ‘in vogue’” (65). It is with the question of imitation and poetics that fashion theory, specifically that of Georg Simmel (Germany, 1858-1918), can give us insight into the dynamics between the lettered city and early female poets. Although Simmel wrote more than a century ago, his classist ideas continue to serve as the basis of modern fashion theory. Simmel wrote that fashion is “a product of class division and operates—like a number of other forms, honour especially—the double function of holding a given social circle together and at the same time closing it off from others” (189). Fashion thus became a way for the group in power—for our purposes, the typically criollo, upper and middle class men of the Central American lettered city—to distinguish themselves from non-hegemonic groups. According to Simmel, fashion relies on the principles of imitation and distinction, meaning that as soon as a distinguishing

fashion is adopted by others, it ceases to be fashionable; imitation, then, both breeds and exterminates fashion (192). Following Simmel's simplistic model of how fashion operates, once members of the intellectual elite in Central America recognized that its styles—romanticismo, modernismo, and posmodernismo—were being adopted by women and enjoyed by the popular classes, it accused them of imitation and quickly distinguished itself with a new fashion, namely avant garde poetics.⁹ In turn, the canon—constructed by literary critics and historians, the guarantors of the lettered city—ignored the continued existence of the “out of fashion” poetics now associated with women and those of lesser talent.

Several recent critics provide insights as to why a sentimental aesthetics and rhetoric were attractive to female poets. Writing about sentimental women's poetry in the United States, for example, Paula Bernat Bennett refers to the Victorian aesthetic of “literary sentimentality” which “became the culturally sanctioned discourse of refined bourgeois sensibility in the United States, as abroad. In its close alliance to domestic ideology, it also gave rise to the vague, idealizing romanticism that we now identify as characteristic of the sentimental or genteel lyric” (11). The Victorian era corresponds with the Belle Epoque, or the emergence of cultural modernity, in the rest of Europe. Often taking cultural cues from Europe, Central American poets still wrote in the high Romantic mode long after Rubén Darío published Azul in 1888. It is extremely commonplace, for example, to see literary references to Bécquer's golondrinas across the poetic oeuvre of Central American female poets as late as the 1930s. Bennett explains that middle-class women not

only wrote a lot of sentimental verse, but used it to inscribe domesticity (22). Similarly, middle-class women in Central America often wrote in a Bécquerian mode to express feminine themes of maternity, domesticity and love. As a form of genteel expression, the sentimental lyric was an acceptable way for women to express themselves by giving what Bennett calls their “domestic personae” a “public pose” (38). With Romanticism in place as a convention of self-expression, female poets were less likely to invent their own positions as subject, which, according to Suleiman, is necessary for women to innovate in literature (26). The “emotional work” (Rubin’s term; Songs 7) of Romanticism, which was providing women with what was considered an appropriate form of personal expression, thus gives way to its cultural work of perpetuating the poetisa stereotype in a gendered literary field that resisted women’s incorporation into the lettered city.

In an analogous time period, Spanish cultural studies critic Noel Valis examines romanticismo and Bécquer in the salon culture of Spain. Despite its also being considered there as an outdated literary style by critics, Becquerian Romanticism was immensely popular throughout the Peninsula, which Valis attributes to “an enduring desire for heightened individual expression of the inner life” (120). Valis explains that Bécquer’s lyrics are ideal for articulating individual subjectivity, especially for women, as they often envision and address a female listener (127). She writes that Bécquer “continually plays with the notion of women as poetry, an image that both flatters and flattens women within the patriarchal scheme of things” (129). Women elected to write in a Becquerian mode, then,

because it allowed them a style in which to write about themselves. By equating women with poetry, Romanticism also equates women with creativity and provides them with a creative outlet. Its intimate nature gives female writers an interior textual space that does not entail transgressing gendered boundaries into public space. Moreover, its homogenous, predictable content lends itself to poetic voices that act as masks: the Romantic mode both overshadows and protects the otherwise vulnerable expression of individual subjectivity.

In addition to the Romantic mode, many poems written in Central America at the beginning of the twentieth century continued the aesthetic of modernismo, which began in 1888 with the publication of Azul by Nicaraguan Rubén Darío. This literary movement—characterized by its excesses in experimental and formal versification, synesthesia, and references to the plastic arts and exotic worlds of swans, princesses and gardens—represented for Central Americans a brand of poetic nationalism. In the 1920s and 30s throughout the Spanish-speaking world, Mexican modernista Amado Nervo continued to enjoy tremendous popularity, especially, as literary historian José María Martínez demonstrates, among women. Martínez explains that it was Nervo's intimate, confessional tone directed towards a female listener, his intense emotion, and themes of love and spirituality that made him appeal specifically to women, who even sent the poet fan mail (87, 90). He cites one of Nervo's contemporary critics, who accuses the poet of being “un sonámbulo del Modernismo [sic] cuya poesía sólo servía para provocar la ictericia de las mujeres o para hacer ‘abortar a las cursis lectoras de sus versos hiperestesiados’” (90). Perhaps

it was Nervo's cursilería and attractiveness among women that made his elevated, spiritual style of modernismo seem dated and subliterate in the 20s and 30s.

Modernismo's appeal to popular culture and subsequent feminization, however, was not felt only by Nervo: it also affected the legacy of Rubén Darío as the literary avant gardes called for artistic revolution in promotion of their experimental creations.

Historian David Whisnant has studied the appropriation of Darío as a national symbol by every Nicaraguan government since the 1880s.¹⁰ He writes, "Darío embodies so much of the negotiable cultural capital of a country that is small and poor" (314). Indeed, Darío's institutionalized influence was strong enough in 1927 that the vanguard Nicaraguan Anti-Academia wanted to oust him in order to renovate national culture. José Coronel Urtecho ended his "Oda a Rubén Darío" (1927) with the following tongue-in-cheek toast accompanied musically by a whistle:

En fin, Rubén,
paisano inevitable, te saludo
con mi bombín,
que se comieron los ratones en
mil novecientos veinte y cin-
co. (102-07)

Later, in 1931, Pablo Antonio Cuadra wrote that one of the movement's objectives was to "hacer un empuje de reacción contra las roídas rutas del siglo XIX" ("Dos

perspectivas” 8-9). Tellingly, however, in her “Retrato mental,” Nicaraguan poet Aura Rostand (1905-1959)—one of the Anti-Academia’s sweethearts (as evidenced by a caricature of the poet by the group’s Joaquín Zavala Urtecho in Nicaragua’s El Gráfico [see Appendix B])—named Darío as “su poeta predilecto” (17-18).

Apparently in spite of the vanguardist campaign against Darío, the national poet retained his popularity throughout the 1930s, specifically among women.

Gerard Aching’s analysis of the cultural work of modernismo also sheds light on the movement’s continued popularity in the 1930s. He writes that, in its heyday, modernista writers used the exclusivity of their formalist verse and references to high culture as a nation-building rhetoric that asserted a classist, cultured community (147). Inscribed in modernista verse was a politics of culture that meant to prove that Latin American nations—still battling perceptions of being intellectual and cultural backwaters—possessed just as much cultural capital as their European counterparts. At the same time, Aching indicates that modernismo embraced excess as a way to describe their experiences of modernity (147). Words became cultural currency whose ostentatious display in modernista verse was a symbol of high economic and cultural class. According to Gwen Kirkpatrick, modernismo meant for its readers to consume its poetic displays: “most modernista techniques ask us to notice what could be called the consumerism of this art” (203). Thus, the modernista reader becomes something akin to a literary flâneur, participating in modernity as a consumer of high culture.

Modernismo worked much in the same way in the 1930s as it did at the fin de siglo: that is, Central American poets ascribing to a modernista poetic in the 1930s did so in order to indicate both socio-economic status and the cultural capital necessary to write such verse. In this way, late modernista poets were still participating in nation-building projects that emphasized the Central American republics' ability to produce and appreciate high art. For female poets, the connotations of cultural capital associated with modernismo would have appealed to them as offering the possibility of being respected as good, able poets in a literary world that otherwise disregarded their writing. Honduran poets Ángela Ochoa Velásquez (1886-1969) and Fausta Ferrera (1891-1971) embrace a modernista aesthetic in just this way. In "Exhortación," Ochoa adopts a lofty, cultured tone to appeal to other poets, who include her male colleagues:

Tallad vuestros diamantes, lapidarios divinos,
sembrad de soles vuestro radio de acción;
llenad el sacro Monte de estrellas y de trinos,
y en el altar de Apolo, haced vuestra oblación. (1-4)

Her use of vosotros, uncommon in Honduras, affects a literary, European-inspired register. Aleandrino versification demonstrates her formal poetic abilities, while classical allusions and modernista images (diamantes, lapidarios) show the poet's cultivated cultural knowledge.

Ferrera, better known for school poetry and what would later be known as exteriorist themes (such as hospitals, sanatoriums and cars), also proves her formal

poetic abilities in “El mejor poeta.” Employing the arte mayor and imagery characteristic of modernismo, Ferrera rejects the refined aesthetic in favor of the farm worker, the “best poet”:

Artífice ignorado, de rima delicada
que en el grano que siembras pones tu inspiración;
al llenar de esmeraldas la parcela dorada,
esas esmeraldas, son tu mejor canción. (1-4)

Ferrera thus raises perceptions of both the worker and herself, an elementary teacher and poetisa, substantiating through her verse that high culture is not restricted to men and the upper classes: women and campesinos can also avail themselves of formal lyric expression.

In writing about modernismo as a discourse on cultural identity, Aching cites Silvia Molloy’s work on Darío’s construction of personal identity through variable subject positions in a way that also reflects on these poetisas:

Darío postula una persona más atenta a la apariencia que a su esencia, más preocupada por la manera en que ha de expresarse que por lo que la constituye. De estos primeros ejemplos podría decirse que más que verdaderas personas son simulacros de personas, simples vehículos de una voz poética que aún no se encuentra: verdaderos shifters en un enunciado fluctuante. (in Aching 151; my emphasis)

Indeed, modernismo’s excess of language could accommodate poetic voices that wanted to hide in the shadows of plentiful signifiers or dress up in various registers

of eccentric vocabulary. In this way, the modernista poetic provided its speakers with something like a mask: because emphasis was placed on the exteriority of language and its outward formalist appearance, intimacy and individual subjectivity were effaced. Like romanticismo's excessive sentimentality, modernismo's excessive artifice would have enticed some female poets who wished to conceal their poetic subjectivity, making the act of writing less personal and therefore less risky to share with the public. Ochoa's "Exhortación" and other early poems work in this way, in that they rarely use the first person or explore relationships between the poetic speaker and the world s/he describes. Instead, her poems in standard versification repeatedly demonstrate the poet's formal abilities, which upstage any attempts at intimacy. For instance, the sonnet, "En la noche," opens with a focus on the first-person, but it is eclipsed after the volta:

Libélula sutil para los vuelos
 me pierdo en el confín de las umbrías
 selvas de luz; y son como pañuelos,
 en un eterno adiós, las almas mías.
 Bajo el propicio encanto de la hora,
 en el que se inician nupcias de luceros,
 y solloza la brisa en los ramajes. (5-11)

The speaker-dragonfly (the dragonfly was a common motif in the art nouveau movement, contemporary to modernismo) gets lost in the swamp of her soul, which

swells over him/her in the night tide. Ochoa's beautiful poetic language and imagery literally swallow up the speaker in a depiction of his/her soul's journey.

Ochoa's poetic oeuvre is interesting in that she also wrote introspective poems in free verse more consistent with descriptions of posmodernismo, which coexisted with ongoing currents of romanticismo and modernismo in 1930s Central America and has been instrumental in marginalizing early female poets' verse in the literary canon because it is so often used as a descriptor of women's poetry.

Posmodernismo is conventionally considered as having begun in 1915 when Mexican poet Enrique González Martínez published "Tuércele el cuello al cisne," announcing the death knell of the modernista swan. In an extreme reaction not only to the artifice of modernismo but also to the mechanical reproduction of the modern age, González Martínez's homogenous verse hearkens back to the romanticismo of the nineteenth century, penning a transcendental voice wrapped up in its poetic sensibility and unity with Nature. Just as they coexisted throughout the early part of the twentieth century, however, posmodernismo, modernismo, and romanticismo can be seen as extensions of one another. In her study on modernismo, Cathy Jrade cites Don Shaw's characterization of modernismo as a natural outgrowth of romanticismo (Rubén Darío 13). In a later book, Jrade elaborates on this point and demonstrates that posmodernismo does not constitute a separate movement from modernismo, but represents a continuation of it (Modernismo 95).¹¹ She writes that, by rejecting the artifice and hack imitations of modernista poetics, the verse of González Martínez "is characterized by a relentless optimism and a supreme confidence in the order of

things” (98). As continuations of each other, romanticismo, modernismo, and posmodernismo each have a transcendental appeal (in that their excesses point to a poetic reality beyond modernity and realism), which can be read as extreme reactions against the tide of modernization. Together, these -ismos appear simultaneously in most of the early poetry published by women in Central America, suggesting again that they can be seen as continuous and contiguous cultural phenomena. For example, critic Julieta Carrera describes Claudia Lars’s first collection as influenced by González Martínez (posmodernista), but with modernista influences of formalism and symbolism: “El formalismo, pesándole en el alma, limita su circunstancia y le quiebra el sobresalto. Claudia Lars permanece simbolista. Su poesía, por lo menos en la primera parte del libro Estrellas en el pozo, conserva un eco de González Martínez” (226; my emphasis). Tellingly, Lars would later bristle at this classification of her early poetry (Gonzalez Huguet 189).

Just as modernismo’s excessive artifice could function to conceal or even erase signs of individual poetic subjectivity, the more romantic mode characteristic of posmodernismo ironically also may have blurred poetic subjectivity by overemphasizing it, especially among female poets. Deeply committed to affective subjectivity, posmodernismo often oozed sentimentality, resulting in romantic sighs, ellipses, and commonplace images and metaphors. Experimentation was excluded from a romantic perception of poetic language that pretended to express the quintessential self. Within this prescriptive mode, poetry was regularly so homogenous that individuality flatlined. One such case of hyper-romanticism’s

swallowing up the poetic voice can be seen in Nicaraguan Carmen Sobalvarro (1908-194?), the only female member of the Nicaraguan Vanguard.¹² As we shall see, the absence of personality in her poems adds to the tragic mystery surrounding her life story.

Poet and journalist Helena Ramos, who is working to recuperate women's literary history in Nicaragua, has written the most on Sobalvarro, whose biography and bibliography remain enigmas. In 2003, Ramos wrote the poem "Nadie recuerda a Carmen Sobalvarro," which laments not only that Sobalvarro has been forgotten, but also the difficulty of recuperating her work due to the poor state of archives in Central America and the fact that many of her contemporaries are now dead. What we know about Sobalvarro is very limited: Ramos tells us that she was involved with the Comité Central Republicano in Honduras and exchanged platonic love letters with César Augusto Sandino ("La mujer" 6). She was also the only member of the Anti-Academia to denounce Somoza's rise to power, which she found so intolerable that she left Nicaragua for Honduras. Because she only published in newspapers and has never been anthologized with the rest of the Anti-Academia, very little remains of her written work.¹³ For Ramos, the fact that Sobalvarro was forgotten by Nicaraguan literary historians begs the question:

si era tan insignificante, ¿cómo esta joven pueblerina logró
 impresionar a los vanguardistas, que eran iconoclastas, altivos y
 excluyentes? Off the record, se ofrece una explicación que no tiene
 nada que ver con la literatura: Carmen Sobalvarro era hermosa, tenía

unos ojos inolvidables... Entonces, la catalogan como una suerte de “novia” del grupo, lo cual no corresponde a la verdad histórica

[basada en lo que sabemos de su actividad política]. (“La mujer” 7)

Wanting to defend Sobalvarro from years of neglect due to sexist literary criticism, Ramos vindicates Sobalvarro’s literary merits, which, unfortunately, is not easy to do.

Sobalvarro’s poetry offers none of the irreverent experimentalism that made her colleagues in the Anti-Academia so infamous. Of her seven surviving poems, two are romances (a form made popular in Central America by Spain’s García Lorca), two are free verse, and one is a prose poem. Thematically, they are dominated by butterflies, sparrows, and flowers, especially the rose. By reveling in trite, “feminine” poetic metaphors, Sobalvarro’s verse does not give us any insight into her self. In fact, it hardly creates any subject at all, except for that of a demure poetisa. For example, in “Cómo me llegó su libro,” the poetic voice describes how a talking butterfly magically dropped Manuel Rosales’s book of modernista short stories into her hands one afternoon:

—Y sonrió la picarona
mariposa, alas de oro...
y me dijo—“Soy princesa
de un castillo encantador,
donde hay príncipes y musas
que tienen por privilegio,

‘voces de terciopelo

Y de cristal’”. (11-20)

The modernista fantasy in this poem borders on childishness and certainly does not reflect the virulent anti-rubendarismo of the Anti-Academia’s “Primer manifiesto,” which Sobalvarro signed. The prose poem, “Yo quisiera ser...”, whose title privileges the first person, does not project personal agency, either. Just as the polite “quisiera” lacks the assertiveness of “quiero,” the poetic subjectivity promised by the “yo” of the title proves to be only a series of delicate clichés:

Yo quisiera ser gotita de rocío; fresca, fresca...y que los rayos del sol
no quisieran consumirla, por lo linda y cristalina. Qué bonito! Vivir
entre los rosales; saber qué dicen los lirios a las blancas margaritas, y
saber...qué les dicen los jazmines a las rosas, cuando pasan los
gorriones mañaneros y las besan. (“Yo quisiera ser...” 1-4)

Despite Ramos’s attempts to remember Sobalvarro as a great vanguardist poet, her verse exemplifies the poetisa aesthetic, mixing together the three popular modes of the 1930s: romanticismo, modernismo, and posmodernismo. One can only hope that Sobalvarro’s lost poetry has more to offer of the avant garde and articulates more complex expressions of self than the five poems that survive. Sadly, these five poems reveal little more than Sobalvarro’s adherence to a prescriptive sentimentality. In this way, her poetry continues to guard the mystery of the forgotten female figure in the Anti-Academia.

Because her poetry does not suggest that Sobalvarro was included in the Anti-Academia due to poetic innovation, the likely “verdad histórica” (that Ramos and I would have liked to be empowering to women) is unfortunately that she was the group’s muse, a role that did not require poetic genius. In her role as muse, Sobalvarro did not have to make anti-aesthetic art: for the Nicaraguan vanguards, she already was art, both inspiration and masterpiece. Because she was pretty, the young men made her their “novia,” a feminine complement to their fraternity and a sentimental embodiment of nationalism and life before modernization, Yankee imperialism, and resulting bourgeois values.¹⁴ In this way, Sobalvarro’s presence in the group underlined a heterosexist ideology that aimed at deflecting the changing realities of gender that accompanied modernization. In her study on representations of gender and modern anxiety, Rita Felski writes about how women symbolically represent the pre-modern: “nostalgia and the feminine come together in the representation of a mythic plentitude against which is etched an overarching narrative of masculine development as self-division and existential loss” (38). Sobalvarro-as-muse thus reinforced the virility and potency of the Anti-Academia’s artistic project, which aesthetically embraced the existentialism of modernity despite their disgust of foreign models of modernization.

In addition to serving as the group’s muse through her bland poetics, Sobalvarro also would have personified the “verdadera mujer nicaragüense” of the “Prólogo solo” in that she supported the anti-imperialist Sandino. As a political activist, Sobalvarro was also apparently embraced as a muse of the people. Quoted

in Managua's El Gráfico, the Honduran press adoringly praises Sobalvarro's work with the Comité Central Republicano pro-Tosta by using her own flowery poetic language: "La distinguida y culta señorita Carmen Sobalvarro, nuestra colaboradora [...] puso punto final, el día de ayer, que fue el día de Carmen, a una de sus radiantes primaveras, y empieza a deshojar hoy otra más, siempre sonriente, como quien deshoja una blanca margarita..." ("Juicio" 5). Sobalvarro's persona as a sweet poetisa thus carried over from the literary to the political field, yielding little more than her poetry as a clue about her roles as activist and artist.

The emotional work of Sobalvarro's poetry not only cast her as a sweet activist, but also allowed others to grieve the death of Sandino through the sentimentalism of her poem, "Estoy triste."¹⁵ Dedicated to "A.C.S." in the year Sandino was assassinated, the poem evokes a flat, bare sadness with its refrain: "Toda / estoy / triste / porque él se fue" (1-4, 23-6). Echoes of Romanticism, however, disrupt the possibility of a grief so gloomy as to be prosaic:

A mi ventana
Los gorriñcitos vienen diciendo:
"lo hemos buscado
Por todos lados de la montaña,
¿dónde estará?" (5-9)

The sparrows (evocative of Bécquer's swallows) and the terminal verb conjugated in the future inscribe the poem with Becquerian cliché, understood by the Spanish-speaking public of this time period as the language of melancholy. Indeed, it was

possibly this shared lyric code that made Sobalvarro's poem so popular: it was a familiar, even comforting, mode for expressing grief and love.

Although Sobalvarro is not the only poet in Central America to eulogize the fallen hero (Leon Aguilera's "A Sandino Muerto" is included within the Nosotras article, and El Salvador's María Loucel (1899-1957) also commemorates him and curses his assassins in "Augusto Sandino"), she is the only one who becomes la novia de Sandino. For example, the subtitle to an article about Sandino's death in Nosotras suggests that "Estoy triste" by Sobalvarro was widely circulated throughout Central America: "Sandino el romántico de la libertad: Cuántas mujeres se sentirán tristes con Carmen Sobalvarro? Cuántas habrían sido novias quiméricas del bandolero de Estrellas Libertarias?" The article not only eulogizes Sandino, but also his fallen wife, Blanca Aráuz, before discussing Sobalvarro's relationship with Sandino:

La muerte de Sandino nos desvela otro romance, digno de este gran romántico del fusil y la ametralladora. Sandino deja una novia. Es una poetisa sutil y comprensiva. Carmen Sobalvarro llora la desaparición del Lempira del Chipote. En la correspondencia que se ha descubierto, la poetisa con la clarividencia de toda pitonisa de las musas, le aconseja a Sandino que se vaya con su gloria a Europa o a Sud América donde se le admira. Le aconseja que no se mezcle en política, que su misión está completa. (n.pag.)

Sobalvarro is now the muse not only of Anti-Academia, but of Sandino and, by extension, of the people who mourn his death. As Sandino's sweetheart, Sobalvarro-the-legend is invested with a romantic melancholy that resonates with a public that feels bereft by its hero's death. Once again, she comes to embody the nostalgia of a perfect time when Sandino still lived and before the anxieties of modernity. She also gives Central American women a safe way, couched in romantic cliché, to approach the progressive politics of Sandino and his revolutionary compañeros, such as Farabundo Martí in El Salvador, throughout the region.

Sobalvarro's verse fits both the stereotype of the poetisa aesthetic and the rubric of posmodernismo. Because the two styles often go together, it is of no surprise that Latin American literary criticism has historically linked posmodernismo with twentieth-century poetry written by women. Comparing posmodernismo to modernista verse, critic Jill Kuhnheim writes:

This poetry is markedly more intimate, often situated in local, rural, rather than urban, cosmopolitan settings, and includes the group of now-canonical female poets—Agustini, Ibarbourou, Storni and Mistral—who often treat atypical modernist themes such as the body, desire and specifically gendered relations. [...] For this reason, it also marks the beginning of the strong tradition of female poets in Spanish America... (Gender 21)

In standard literary histories, posmodernismo as a Latin American literary movement has come to carry a gendered connotation and too often does not entail men beyond

González Martínez, who famously twisted the neck of modernismo's swan. For example, literary historian Javier de Navascués writes that “otro aspecto importante del posmodernismo es el sustancial incremento de mujeres entre la nómina de escritores relevantes: Gabriela Mistral, Juana de Ibarbourou, Teresa de la Parra, Alfonsina Storni, María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, etc.” (13). In Historia esencial de la literatura española e hispanoamericana (2000), Felipe Pedraza and Milagros Rodríguez write under the subheading, “Las poetisas”: “El posmodernismo trae un auge desconocido de la poesía femenina en la América española. Varias de sus representaciones han pasado a nuestro canon literario” (517). The gender of posmodernismo is not problematic until it acts as a marginalizing classification for female poets. Writing about Storni, for instance, Kirkpatrick complains that the poet is “so often seen in isolation from any poetic tradition other than a narrowly defined feminine one” (242). The “narrowly-defined feminine” tradition to which Kirkpatrick is referring is posmodernismo. Because the canonical female poets have become so readily classified as posmodernistas, it is often forgotten that the aesthetic was perhaps practiced more by men than by women as late as the 1930s.¹⁶

Moreover, generally described as an extension of modernismo, or as a literary moment that took place in between modernismo and vanguardismo, posmodernismo has been critically neglected both as a movement and as an aesthetic: it is often used as a catch-all category for poets whose work cannot be described as modernista or avant garde. As a gendered, marginalized categorization, then, posmodernismo has come to be somewhat reviled. For example, González Huguet writes that Claudia

Lars came to detest the influence of posmodernismo in her earliest collections: “En ediciones posteriores, Claudia será muy crítica hacia estos poemas. Quizás le disgustará la tendencia a favor del posmodernismo a lo Enrique González Martínez” (110). In this way, the classifier posmodernista often carries with it a gendered cachet similar to that of a middlebrow aesthetic, or one meant to display cultural capital, which will be examined in the Central American context in the pages to come.

Analogous to the time period in which sentimentality flourished throughout Western literature was the literary salon, which was often associated with women’s literary activities. Popular throughout Europe and the United States, salons corresponded with the development of a middle class with pretensions of displaying its possession of culture (Valis, for example, associates Bécquer’s popularity in Spain at the beginning of the twentieth century with a vibrant salon culture there.). Literary historian Elizabeth Horan writes of writer Carmen Lyra’s literary and cultural salon in San José, which was Costa Rica’s first (The Subversive Voice 13).¹⁷ Although no formal studies exist on other literary salons in Central America, several factors support the likelihood of a salon culture throughout the region in the early twentieth century. First, the emergence of a middle class meant that Central Americans had more leisure time. Historian Ralph Woodward writes, “The upper classes provided a thin veneer of culture and refinement in more traditional European terms. The emerging middle class worshipped material culture..., often in imitation of the more garish aspects of North American life” (204). What Woodward calls the

“veneer of culture and refinement”—whether imported from Europe or North America—made culture a valuable commodity in that it served as a marker of high-class taste. The fashionable literary salon would have fed into this desire for cultural prestige by providing both space and activity for displaying cultural capital. Second, an ongoing tradition of poetic tertulias among Central American intellectuals meant that literary gatherings were held in high esteem.¹⁸ The tertulia already provided a model for the literary salon. Third, there is a documented presence of a number of social clubs for women, such as the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral (which will be further examined in Chapter 3 for its relation to the theosophy movement). These clubs, which typically met in private homes, would have allowed women of the middle and upper classes to gather and discuss cultural and social issues. These gatherings would have also been an occasion to share and recite poetry as club members promoted and celebrated cultural and literary work by other women. The presence of these clubs, combined with an appreciation for the literary tertulia and the emergence of upper and middle classes eager to participate in international movements as a sign of culture, contribute to a gendered salon culture—whether it was recognized as such or not in its day—in early twentieth-century Central America.

Cultural critic Ana Parejo Vadillo describes the European salon at the fin de siglo as “a hybrid space, between the sphere of the public and that of the domestic, one which opened the privacy of the home to the publicity of the literary world, and hence a complex mediator of both” (23). As hybrid spaces, salons allowed for the

literary and social imagination of the modern woman (23). In this way, salons contributed to what critic Jennifer Shepherd has described as “cultural feminism,” or the cultural cultivation and celebration of women through education (110). Nowhere was this cultural feminism as prevalent as in Guatemala, where female journalists, such as Luz Valle (1896-1971), Malín de Echevers (1896-1974), Gloria Menéndez Mina and Josefina Saravia eschewed periodical space for fellow women writers. Among these women, Valle was particularly instrumental in ensuring that women felt supported in publishing their writing.

In 1932, Valle premiered Nosotras, a magazine dedicated exclusively to women and their concerns. In addition to content geared towards the traditional housewife, the magazine also ran opinions about women’s right to vote, what it meant to be “feminist,” and even exposés on the poor working conditions for women in Guatemala’s textile factories. Each month, the magazine showcased poetry written by Hispanic women from Central America, other Latin American countries, and Spain. Most of this poetry fit the stereotype of a poetisa aesthetic, combining the styles mentioned above of romanticismo, modernismo, and posmodernismo, as well as poems that were character sketches of friends for their scrapbooks and costumbrista depictions of Guatemala’s indigenous population and tourist hotspots. Nevertheless, by consistently encouraging women to write and publish, Nosotras—and by extension the women’s page in El Imparcial, a women’s hour on the national radio, and the women’s magazines, Alma América and Azul—provided Guatemalan and Central American women with a safe space in which to cultivate and share their

literary talents. For example, in promoting the work of Romelia Alarcón de Folgar (Guatemala, 1900-1971), the editorial staff (which was Valle, herself) included the following statement of encouragement:

La revista femenina “Nosotras” ha sido creada especialmente para [romper la modestia y timidez de nuevas colaboradoras]. Para establecer un eslabón fraternal entre todas las mujeres y para que quienes se sientan temerosas de acudir a los periódicos o a las revistas de otra índole, vengán hasta sus páginas y en ellas escriban todo lo que deseen... (“Nuevas colaboradoras” n.pag.)

Nosotras thus established a supportive sorority among Central American female writers that effectively brought dozens of women’s voices into print.

Having pioneered Guatemala’s first women’s magazine and a supportive space for women to publish, Valle and her contributions did not go unappreciated by her contemporaries. In 1941, the magazine published the master’s thesis of Carmen Zea Ruano about the history of women’s poetry in Guatemala. She wrote about Valle, who was also a poet, that

Gracias a su acción un grupo de mujeres saludó el despertar de Guatemala en 1920. ¿Fue labor puramente literaria o fue influencia del feminismo? Desde esta acción, la poesía femenina no ha decaído en Guatemala. [...] Dirige la revista, Nosotras, donde ha dado a conocer los valores de la literatura femenina, y el mérito no está solo

en darles a conocer sino en buscarlos, en despertar entusiasmo en la mujer guatemalteca. (n.pag.)

Given this recognition by a contemporary, it is not off base to refer to Valle and her colleagues as the Nosotras Generation of Female Poets in Guatemala, which encompasses nearly all poetisas who published in Guatemala in the 1930s, including the following women: Luz Valle, Magdalena Spínola, Angelina Acuña (1905-2006), Laura Rubio de Robles (1886-1975), Olivia de De Wyld, Romelia Alarcón del Folgar (1900-1971), Olga Violeta Luna de Marroquín, María del Pilar de Garcia, Martha Mencés de Aparicio, Clemencia Morales Tinoco, Blanca de los Ríos, Annie Valladares Saenz, Dolores Adamé, Annie Flefil, Blanca Perla Estrada Castaneda, Sara Genser, Lola Villacorta Vidaurre, Margarita Leal y Rubio (a.k.a. Griselda Montes de Oca, Bethsaida Oca), Trinidad de Camacho, Amanda Castillo R., A. de la Roca, A. Rodríguez Saravia, Adriana Saravia de Palarea, Margarita de Azori, Lucía Martínez Sobral de Tejada, Carmen Alicia Cadilla, Herminia Bermúdez L., Matilde Vela S., Estella Márquez (a.k.a. Clemencia Rubio v. de Herrarte) and Herlinda D. Pinto.¹⁹ Many of these women would go on to publish in other media throughout Central America and even publish books of their own.²⁰ With the exceptions of Acuña, Spínola and Alarcón—who are better known for poetry written and published later in their lives—none of these pioneers have been remembered in Guatemalan literary scholarship.

As a women's magazine, Nosotras did separate itself from more mainstream media marketed to both genders, but it apparently tried to minimize the extent to

which its contributors were marginalized as mere poetisas. For example, in 1937, the magazine featured the poetry of Nicaraguan poet, Aura Rostand, whose poetry and intellectual activities it described as a “distinguida intelectual centroamericana” and part of a Latin American sisterhood of “brillantes escritoras” (“Aura Rostand, nicaragüense” n.pag.). Rostand’s featured poetry, in turn, lauds Latin American poetic mothers, Mistral, Storni and Ibarbourou, familiarly referring to them on a first-name basis in “Gabriela, Alfonsina y Juana.” In “María del Pilar,” she twice describes the Guatemalan poet as “intelectual / y fraternal” (4-5, 11-12). Valle’s collaborators thus recognized the value of her project in Nosotras and recognized one another as members of an intellectual sorority meant to further the education and participation of women in Central American intellectual life.

Colección lila, the 1938 anthology uniting the poetry of Spínola, del Pilar, Luna and Acuña, can be seen as yet another important textual example of Guatemalan salon culture and cultural feminism in that it is a bound space that for the first time unites exclusively female poets and introduces them to the public.²¹ Lacking an introduction or prologue, Colección lila does not explicitly state its goal of promoting women’s culture, but its feminist intentions are clear by the fact that it is the first collection of poetry written and published exclusively by women in Central America (its implicit feminism is somewhat eclipsed, however, by its title: lila can mean both a flower, which traditionally carries feminine connotations, and “stupid” or “simple.”). This small volume, which measures only 3.75 inches by 5 inches, features mostly unremarkable themes and styles typically associated with the

poetisa aesthetic, most notably Bécquer's golondrinas and themes of love and maternity.²² Sadly, despite being a pioneering anthology, Colección lila has never received any attention in literary histories or bibliographies of Guatemala.²³ More in-depth archival research of Guatemala's print media is needed to investigate how the volume was received in its day, but as Spínola and Acuña would go on to publish collections of poetry, its reception must not have been too discouraging.

The Sociedad Gabriela Mistral, founded in honor of the Chilean poet, functioned more conventionally as a literary salon through its promotion of women's education and culture in its meetings and in its project of a public women's reading room. Although Central American intellectual historian, Marta Elena Casaús Arzú, only documents the club's activity in Guatemala, it likely existed throughout Central America, as Alegría remembers its presence in El Salvador as a girl and Arellano verifies that it was also in Nicaragua (personal interviews). Casaús describes the club in this way:

un grupo de mujeres, en su mayoría escritoras y poetisas, que se reúnen en torno a una sección cultural llamada "Sociedad Gabriela Mistral"; poseen sus propios espacios públicos y al menos un par de columnas fijas en las revistas y periódicos de la época, que utilizan para debatir los derechos de género y para conseguir sus derechos de ciudadanía. ("La influencia" 34)

Casaús cites the constitution of the Sociedad as fundamentally feminist, in that "pretende abolir la inferioridad de las mujeres, demostrar que, aunque sea en un

limitado círculo, tanto vale y puede tanto el hombre como la mujer y que, siendo un ser de elevados sentimientos, es digna de justicia y de igualdad política y social” (in “La influencia” 37). Maintaining the value of women’s “heightened sentiments,” the club effectively propagated the stereotype of women as essentially emotional, versus the perception of men as predominantly “rational” beings. This “essence” of femininity combined well with the Sociedad’s moderate brand of feminism, which “no pretende fabricar literatas petulantes, garozas sin moralidad, ni hombrunas sufragistas enemigas del hogar” (in Casaús “La influencia” 37). Apart from advocating women’s equal participation in intellectual, political, and spiritual life through the shared tenets of theosophy, the Sociedad did not offer a radical break from conventional behavior codes for women. Nevertheless, the fact that it provided a context in which women, especially those who would lead the suffrage movement in 1944, could meet and share ideas makes it a fundamental part of Guatemalan (and Central American) women’s history.

One of the projects of the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral was to encourage culture and education among women through public reading rooms, a cause that it shared with Nosotras, which regularly promoted good reading habits and reading for pleasure, as well as education. Casaús cites a newspaper article by club member Graciela Rodríguez López: “La Sociedad Gabriela Mistral hace un llamamiento a la mujer guatemalteca para que concurra a la sala de lectura donde encontrará libros escogidos y podrá comentarlos debidamente” (in “La influencia” 38). By selecting readings for women, the Sociedad also acted as a kind of regulator or mediator of

women's reading materials. The article also implies that the Sociedad directed the interpretation of these readings in guided discussions in the club's reading room. Such prescribed reading for women by women created a gendered reading public of certain books. The fact that there is no documentation about what types of books were available in the Sociedad's reading room makes little difference: the institution of the women's salons forms a gendered literary practice that harkens back to the gendered conversation about reading and writing that took place throughout Latin America in the 1920s and 30s and corresponds historically with the 1926 creation of the Book-of-the-Month Club in the United States, which Rubin attributes in part to the formation of "middlebrow" culture in North America by seeking to "sustain a vision of the cultured self" through the consumption of culture, specifically books (The Making 96). As a feminine organization that determined the content of a women's reading room, the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral also contributed to the creation of a gendered, "middlebrow" culture in Central America. Akin to gendered reading communities, perceptions of a gendered book market existed in Latin America. Unruh writes that in Argentina's Caras y caretas,

A defining trait of the modern Latin American woman...is her equivocal relationship to literary culture. [...] Although romance novels are her favorites, she also purchases poetry by Mexico's sentimental modernista Amado Nervo, the prescribed model of the day for aspiring poetisas. This portrayal of the New Woman as a reader whose choices warrant regulation juxtaposes an anxiety toward

women's changing roles with the literary world's ambivalent relationship to media culture. (Performing 14)

A similar perception is seen in El Imparcial, in which a 1929 satirical op-ed piece by "Aurora Boreal" chides the author's friend for not sharing her love for romance novels ("Mi amiguita no lee novelas" 5).

In her 1942 essay, "Middlebrow," Virginia Woolf first described the middlebrow as a pernicious mixture of artistic culture and aesthetic taste with twentieth-century materialism and commercialism: for the middlebrow masses aspiring to be highbrow, she argued, culture has become something that can be purchased and displayed (201). Women's studies book historian, Janice Radway, concedes that North American middlebrow culture is "an economic product, born of a transgressive union between art and a historically specific system of mass production, distribution and consumption," but argues that it has also "been persistently gendered" and that the consumption of culture "served as a key ideological battlefield in the twentieth-century struggle over women's social position" (871-2).²⁴ Much like poetisa aesthetics' pejorative associations of imitation and being out-of-fashion, the term "middlebrow" also carries negative connotations of false pretensions and feminine frivolity. Not only have the gendered associations of middlebrow culture represented anxieties about women's changing roles in an increasingly modern world, but it has had the concrete effect of keeping women out of the literary establishment. To this end, Andreas Huyssen writes, "The universalizing ascription of femininity to mass culture always depended on the very

real exclusion of women from high culture and its institutions” (62). Moreover, in Latin America, the constant exclusion of women from the lettered city and her portrayal as culturally inferior has contributed to the creation of gendered literary fields that affect how female authors view and express themselves in writing, often perpetuating the gendered aspect of the middlebrow myth.

Leaving the gendered politics of the middlebrow aside, in her study of North American popular literature, Rubin explores both the cultural practices leading to the development of middlebrow culture, as well as the role that this culture played in creating a modern, middle-class consumer. In The Making of Middlebrow Culture, she contends that the middlebrow does not merely constitute the range between “high” and “low” cultures, but that it gave twentieth-century North Americans an outlet to preserve the values of the genteel tradition while also participating in modernity’s consumer-driven, mercantile society (xviii). She writes that, as people pursued this genteel appearance during the 1920s and 30s, the idea of “self-culture” developed, which meant that an individual can cultivate learning and culture as signs of refinement, class, and good taste. The elite fear of “standardization” (the results of pragmatic and democratic education that threatened to level the cultural playing field), the Book-of-the-Month Club, and the role of the commercial media in the promotion of “great books” and reading guides all contributed to the consolidation of a middlebrow culture and aesthetic in the United States. In Central America, although not to the same degree, similar cultural trends can be mapped, leading to an incipient middlebrow culture that took on a particular regional identity due to pre-

established literary inclinations towards romanticismo, modernismo, and posmodernismo that came together in the figure of the poetisa.

As middlebrow culture aspired to showcasing indicators of high culture, it fed into fears of social standardization, which was perceived as a threat by the upper classes because traditional markers of socio-economic class, such as literacy and professional specialization, were being erased. As we shall see in more detail in chapter 4, Central America followed the lead of the Mexican Revolution in promoting education among the rural and indigenous poor as a way of socially assimilating, or “standardizing,” them into a modern, national project. Social anxieties about standardization in Central America often targeted women because they were regularly at the forefront of social and educational reforms as rural teachers, school administrators, journalists, and writers of pedagogical materials. Women’s training in unprecedented numbers in normal schools, journalism schools (such as the Escuela Femenina de Prensa in Nicaragua), and lecture halls not only prepared women for lives in the classroom and the pressroom, but also blurred intellectual and professional boundaries that once separated them from men. In Central America, women authored and performed cultural programs in periodicals and on the radio that regularly targeted other women. As previously mentioned, middle-class women were involved in literary and cultural clubs and were readers of women’s magazines that catered to popular notions of literary taste. In these ways, women were actively cultivating what Rubin calls “self-culture.” Although Central American men also participated in “self-culture,” women did so in a newly visible,

organized manner that was meant to promote their advancement in economic and political life. Due to the public nature of women's "self-culture"—perhaps initiated in Central America by Nicaraguan Josefa Toledo de Aguerri's widely read magazines, Revista femenina ilustrada (1918-20) and Mujer nicaragüense (1929-30) and perpetuated by the Guatemalan women's magazines already discussed—it is not surprising that Central American middlebrow culture was also gendered feminine.

Since the middlebrow constituted a reading public bent on consuming signs of genteel culture, in Central America these readers would have shown a preference for Romantic and modernista poetics as signs of their cultural capital. As if mutually reinforcing one another, Central American poets courted this reading market by embracing the grandiose styles of romanticismo and modernismo as late as the 1940s. Therefore, it would have been particularly important to female poets and female readers to demonstrate their cultural aptitudes by adopting the Romantic and modernista styles. For this reason it is likely that the female poets of the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral demonstrated a clear preference for and influence by modernista verse (Casaús "La influencia" 38). Ostentatiously flaunting its wealth of words and classical allusions, modernismo carries with it a certain amount of middlebrow pretense. Describing modernista aficionados as sometimes having more poetic currency than taste, Kirkpatrick writes:

modernista poets, like newcomers to aristocracy, insert strange and contradictory elements in their constructions. Though they leave the foundations intact, they rearrange color schemes, substitute chickens

for peacocks, and even at times point out that they are clearly imitating others' work, as one would leave a manufacturer's tag on a piece of furniture. (205)

Modernista aesthetics allowed poets to display their cultural proficiency, which readers—wanting also to prove their good taste and cultured background—eagerly consumed.

In her work on Mexican-U.S. border literature of the 1900s, Kirsten Silva Gruesz validates poetic imitation in a similar way. She explains, “the farther one went from urban institutions of authority and validation, the more elastic and accessible the role of the ‘taste-maker’ became” (20). Like the Mexican-U.S. border, Central America is removed from Hispanic cultural centers such as Havana, Mexico D. F., and Buenos Aires. In these peripheral regions, Silva Gruesz argues, writing poetry was “less an experiment in raw self-expression than a symbolic claim on larger forms of authority” (20). She argues subjects on the margins of the lettered cities stake a claim on cultural authority by producing literature in the words and style of those with cultural prestige. Seen this way, it is not surprising that Central Americans—especially women—capitalized on the poetic styles of modernismo and romanticismo well into the twentieth century. Moreover, as Silva Gruesz points out, these were widely known and appreciated modes of poetry, and their conventional styles would have appealed to a larger number of readers and listeners, allowing people with different levels of literacy and cultural understanding to participate in their diffusion (25).

Although some Central American poets of the 1930s, both male and female, wrote in a middlebrow modernista mode, the male poets (such as Guatemalans Carlos Fletes Sáenz and Alfonso Quetzales) have typically been excluded from the canon and literary history in favor of more experimental poets, such as Luis Cardoza y Aragón and those of the Anti-Academia, thus leading to the perception that men did not write in the sentimental mode. Male writers, such as Miguel Ángel Asturias, whose earliest poems are both dull and overly-romantic, have been remembered primarily for their later, more innovative work. Sentimental female poets, on the other hand, have not generally been replaced by more experimental female poets in the literary canon, as women were seldom included in the canon at all. For these reasons, perhaps, the outdated, excessive and sentimental poetics popular in early twentieth-century Central America continue to be more associated with women than with men.

In Central America, middlebrow culture and poetisa poetry are connected in that both carry negative connotations and are also seen as “feminine,” contributing to a gendered literary field that has affected the reception of women’s writing not only historically, but in terms of its production, as well. As Rubin points out, because middlebrow culture is often pejoratively linked with “feminine” pretensions of acquiring and displaying culture (implying that, unlike men, women are fundamentally unintelligent and without aesthetic taste), the middlebrow has also been neglected in terms of the aesthetic and cultural work it performs (The Making xv). On a similar note, I contend that early women’s poetry in Central America, so

often summarily dismissed as “bad,” has led to a general critical neglect of poetisas and their aesthetic and cultural work. Operating together, Central American middlebrow culture and the poetisa aesthetic inform the subject formation of female readers and writers and affects women’s relationships to the intellectual and literary establishment by keeping them at bay.

Perhaps nowhere do middlebrow and poetisa aesthetics converge more remarkably than in three collections published by Guatemalan Olivia de Wyld (n.d.) in 1934, 1935 and 1936. The cursilería of de Wyld’s verse, painfully cliché and insipid in its imitations of religious mysticism and romantic and modernista themes, is intensified by what the author describes in a prologue as “cuadros que primorosamente refleja la vida natural, mujeres distinguidas, niños y selectos paisajes” (Pinceladas 3). These photographic “cuadros” are nothing more than Guatemalan society pages, a gimmick, perhaps, to entice more readers and sell more books (see fig. 1); in fact, many of the very same images also occur in Nosotras as society pages.²⁵ If her poetry cannot draw a large readership, the Guatemalan middle class might have bought de Wyld’s collections to see photos of their friends and family.²⁶ Publishing a book a year for three consecutive years, de Wyld created something akin to a lyric yearbook, or álbum, a popular hobby among bourgeoisie women of the time period.²⁷

Further blurring the boundaries between high culture and consumer culture, the innovative de Wyld or her editor thought of another way to ensure de Wyld’s

financial success through poetry. Her second two collections, Arrullos (1935) and Destellos del alma (1936), featured commercial advertisements. Presumably sold to Guatemalan businesses in order to finance publishing costs, these ads testify to a booming middle and upper class. They promoted the following goods and businesses: residential and commercial real estate, aspirin, make-up, department stores, the electric company, light bulbs, charities, tailors, cement and tile companies, brick companies, a tie shop, furniture companies, the United Fruit Company's cruise liner, a photographer, a candle factory, grocery stores, dry goods companies, jewelry stores, two dental surgeons, pharmacies, a hardware store, a milliner, a perfume shop, a funeral home, and de Wyld's previously published books. The diversity of her sponsors suggests that de Wyld's poetic "society pages" reached audiences that were in financial positions to take part in a growing consumer culture of fashion, new modern homes, and books. These ads attracted her readers with modern consumer and social pretensions and also promised cultural refinement: like new houses and the latest style of shoes, cultural capital (here, in the form of poetry) could be purchased.

If not a particularly talented poet, de Wyld (or her editor) demonstrates some business acumen with the use of ads and society pages to sell books. Writing about the middlebrow fiction and advertisement in the U.S. context represented by Harper's magazine, Sarah Churchwell describes modern middlebrow writers as "part



Fig. 1. Society photo from Olivia de Wyld, Pinceladas (Guatemala: Unión Tipografía): 41. The image bears the caption, “Señorita Margarita Macal Novela, toda juventud y belleza, a la cual une su exquisita cultura.” Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

of a new professional managerial class that was self-supporting and ‘businesslike’ and yet also conceived of itself as or aspired to be tasteful, refined, cultured” (160). The business approach to de Wyld’s poetry may seem an extreme example of the Central American middlebrow, but it nevertheless would have fed into perceptions of middle-class women, who were featured throughout de Wyld’s books, as consumers of culture as though it were a material good. Further implicating the modern woman as a symbol of consumerism in the uneasy age of modernization, de Wyld

perpetuates negative stereotypes about poetisa poetry by combining it with what Rita Felski has called “the aesthetics of consumption” (61). Here the commoditization of poetry, often associated with high art, can be equated to prostitution: de Wyld’s body of poetry, gendered feminine because of its inferior quality, is being sold not only to her readers, but to commercial advertisers.

De Wyld is not the only Central American poet who can be accused of selling her body of poetry. Janet Gold writes that Honduran poet Clementina Suárez (1902-1991) capitalized on her infamy throughout Central America as a declaimer and poet to sell her literary magazine, Mujer:

She appears on the front cover of the 4 March 1934 issue of Tegucigalpa Magazine dressed in a feminine version of a bellhop’s uniform, offering her magazine for sale. Although it is a posed studio photograph, she did indeed take to the streets to publicize and sell Woman, not only in the capital but in the cities on the North Coast as well. (Clementina 111)

The image of a woman selling her poetry was reiterated in Nicaragua’s El Gráfico. In the 27 July 1930 edition, a photo of a young woman selling books in a crowd is accompanied by the title, “Una poetisa en la calle,” followed by the explanation:

Ya los poetas no se ocupan sólo de escribir libros. También los venden en las esquinas, los vocean en las plazas, los pregonan en las puertas como cualquier otro producto del trabajo humano, empleando

para la difusión de sus versos la mayor o menor fascinación que
emana de sus personas. (n.pag.)

Although the little article goes on to identify this woman as Berlin's Erna Thaler (i.e., not one of Central America's own poetisas), the fact that the image appeared in the Nicaraguan weekly testifies to a heightened awareness in Central American both of the novelty of commercializing the arts and to that of the increased presence of women in the public spheres of the market, street and letters. These peddling poetisas were not met with praise: Gold writes that in Honduras, "Many considered it either inappropriate or amusing that Clementina offered her books for sale [...] her relatives were embarrassed, and the gossips had something to discuss for weeks" (106). Nevertheless, the recurring image of "una poetisa en la calle" consolidates all three spaces—market, street and letters—once consigned exclusively to men.

The public advertising of the poetry of de Wyld, Suárez, and Thaler is only one aspect of middlebrow aesthetics. In her discussion of Anita Loos's 1925 serialized novel, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Churchwell writes that Lorelei, the New York socialite protagonist, "indiscriminately displays all the markers of cultural and economic capital she can find, but ineptly" (143). De Wyld, like Lorelei, accessorizes to excess to show off her wealthy socio-economic status (see fig. 2). In her photograph at the beginning of Destellos, a plump de Wyld wears a fur stole pinned with a rhinestone broach. Another rhinestone broach adorns her headband, which holds back her modern, bobbed curls. De Wyld's costume jewelry, like her painted-on facial features and false eyelashes, also denote artifice as markers of

modernity and upper-class style. Describing Lorelei's penchant for knock-off handbags and fake jewels, Churchwell writes that "the 'authentic reproduction' was understood as the mark of the middlebrow, who could purchase the signs of 'high culture' thanks to the technology of mechanical reproduction" (143). Seen in this light, de Wyld's poetry, an "authentic reproduction" of modernismo and Romantic sentimentality, is one more symptom of modernization and its associated loss of aura and gentility.

Churchwell writes that Anita Loos, the author of Gentlemen, consistently downplayed the labor of her writing when she was interviewed (139). Her public persona thus portrayed the female writer as engaging in a leisure activity, another status symbol of the bourgeois lifestyle and upper class. Similarly, in her prologue to Pinceladas, her first collection, de Wyld depicts her book as something to be enjoyed during "breves minutos...entre el silencio y el reposo" (3). In the early twentieth century's gendered literary conversations mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, more serious, "masculine" writers would not have considered their writing to be a frivolous leisure activity. As we shall see, most serious female writers did not consider their work to be frivolous, either, and strove to overcome the gendered stereotypes of women's writing perpetuated (consciously or not) by de Wyld. Whereas some Central American female poets, such as Suárez, bucked the diminutive label poetisa by writing brazenly erotic and political verse, others wrote with a poetisa aesthetic initially, to grow later into more experimental and distinctive poetic styles. One such poet was Spínola, who began to write biting political and

feminist poetry in the 1940s, after the fall of dictator Jorge Ubico, who had assassinated her husband in 1934. In El Salvador, the poetry of Lars, the most recognized Central American female poet and the only to have been canonized before the arrival of women's studies, became much more interesting and stylized in later collections. The fact that these poets cast off bland poetisa aesthetics in favor of more experimental verse may simply reflect an organic poetic maturation. Indeed, one can read the trajectories of early twentieth century female poets' publications as



Fig. 2. Portrait of Olivia de Wyld in Destellos del alma (Guatemala: Talleres Tipográficos San Antonio, 1936): 3. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

a kind of biographical Kunstlerroman, insofar as these books document the literary maturation of these poets. On the other hand, however, it is also possible to read these female poets' early poetics as not merely passive receptions of popular poetic styles, but as active choices.

One such poet is Spínola, whose early poetisa aesthetic could have functioned as a mask during the decades of repressive dictatorship in Guatemala. After her husband was executed in 1934 for having conspired against the Ubico dictatorship, Spínola was briefly imprisoned and was ostracized by friends and family (Aguilar 54-5).²⁸ The poetry she published during this time—formally well-crafted with linguistic influences of Federico García Lorca or Leopoldo Lugones—is devoid of any biographical or political content.²⁹ In Colección lila, several of Spínola's poems mournfully address a male lover who is gone, as do many of the poems she published in Nosotras. The melancholy of these poems can be read both as a commonplace in sentimental poetry dealing with unrequited love and, perhaps, as a soft-spoken way in which Spínola felt safe expressing the rage and grief she must have felt at the hands of Ubico. Supporting my reading that Spínola's poetisa aesthetics could have acted as a mask of deeper political sentiments is a description of the effects of state censorship and fear of the dictatorship in the print media. Unable or unwilling to publish and "real" national news or political and social commentary, periodicals at this time became merely "superficiales voceros de opinion y refugios de producción literaria" (Asociación de Amigos del País; quoted in Trujillo, et.al., 46).³⁰ In this context of tyranny, in which people knew how to

“read” what could not be said in print, Spínola’s poetisa aesthetics could have been interpreted as a coded cover-up for what she could not say. In fact, Spínola did use her poetry to condemn the dictator explicitly in 1944, the year he fell from power, when she publicly declaimed “Elegía del que cayó” on el Día de los Muertos, ironically also the anniversary of her husband’s execution. From 1944, both her poetry and her activities as a leader in Guatemala’s feminist movement took on a decidedly political focus.

Similar to how Spínola possibly used a poetisa aesthetic to veil her protest of her husband’s death, Claudia Lars (1899-1974) also may have used a poetisa aesthetic strategically in her earliest collections. As I will examine in chapters to come, this unassuming poetic disguised subtle and subversive criticisms of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez’s dictatorial regime in El Salvador and his 1932 massacre of more than 30,000 indigenous peasants.³¹ At the surface, however, Estrellas en el pozo seems like nothing more than homogenous, sentimental exposition put in metered form, leaving little space for ambiguity or linguistic play. The poetic voice apparently spells out its emotions self-consciously, calcifying the opportunity for semantic slippage that makes poetry pleasurable and interesting to read. In short, the early poetry of Claudia Lars seems to exemplify the negative stereotypes associated with a poetisa aesthetic.

In Estrellas en el pozo, Lars’s poetry shows a general preoccupation with the speaker’s identity as a poet. In the sonnet “Poeta soy,” the third poem of the collection that serves as an arte poética, the speaker asserts her poetic calling as a

God-given vocation. Many poetisas, such as Suárez in Honduras and Brenes de Hilarova in Costa Rica, also wrote about their vocations as poets. This trend is significant in that it demonstrates female poet's desire to be taken seriously by their male colleagues as poets. This self-justification is apparent throughout Lars's collection, reaffirming her professional and personal identification as a poet (not a poetisa!). For example, in "Estrellas en el pozo" the speaker expresses that "... fue por gracia d'El que no Se nombra: / mi anhelo..." (49-50). The speaker's obsession with identifying herself as a poet posits the indisputability of her divinely-inspired identity. Perhaps it is this quality that prompts Carrera to compare Lars to Teresa de Jesús (227). I see this mysticism as a rhetorical strategy for transcending the confines of sexual difference, or the label of poetisa. In Plotting Women, Franco demonstrates how asserting a mystical persona—a gendered identity ironically imposed by the patriarchal religious system—not only allowed women to write in the middle ages and the Baroque, but also afforded them an outlet of erotic expression, which would otherwise be punishable by the Inquisition (xiv). As we shall see in chapter 2, Suárez uses such a mystic persona towards shockingly erotic ends, turning patriarchal religion on its head. Lars did not use mysticism for erotic expression, per se, but she did employ mysticism—a common theme in poetisa poetry—as a conduit for self expression and to further her identification as a poet.

Estrellas en el pozo is thematically dominated by a contemplation of the divine; the majority of the poems make direct reference to Dios or some Supreme Being. Almost all of the poems of the second half of the collection, subtitled Cantos

de la madre and dedicated to Lars's son, Roy, represent a speaker identified as a mother addressing her son.³² Her motherhood, like her vocation as poet, is depicted as a gift from God. The poetic voice describes her own embodiment of the divine, stating later in the same poem that now she understands "el misterio que hay en la mujer," also bestowed by God (18). In "Que de dónde a mí llegaste?" the speaker explains that "para que tú llegaras / es que Dios me hizo mujer" (39-40). Once again, Lars employs the traditional imaginary of maternity as a rhetorical strategy for gaining acceptance as a woman writing. As an acceptable trope for women, motherhood would not have threatened readers of the status quo or the male bastions of the lettered city. Also, by affirming her biological womanhood, she writes from a position of sexual difference that allows her to affirm her role as poet in a conventional way: she can balance being both poet and mother, and both are divinely inspired roles valued for the creative capabilities. Although she is effectively confirming stereotypes of women that traditionally have limited them to being the Angel of the Home, the fact that she will soon surpass these gendered expectations in her second collection, Canción redonda (1937), suggests that her initial employment of a poetisa aesthetic served strategically (intentionally or not) to appeal to a larger reading public. In this way, she was able to some extent to ensure a reading public for her future poetry, which would explicitly tackle political themes.

In 1932 the Costa Rican cultural magazine, Repertorio americano, introduced Lars to its readers. After publishing several of her poems, Joaquín García Monge, the magazine's editor, wrote that several readers had inquired about her identity.

Taking the lead story for February 13, 1932, an article titled, “¿Claudia Lars cómo se llama?” described Lars to her new fans.³³ Here she is described in very gendered terms, once again equating her poetic vocation with motherhood: “Claudia Lars, su hijito y sus versos. Tres cosas que en mi pensamiento son como un solo tallo florido. [...] Es que el recuerdo de Lars con su hijito y sus versos [impulsa] a mi imaginación a volar como golondrina” (82). When these early poems first published in Repertorio americano were collected in Estrellas en el pozo two years later, the volume met with an unprecedented positive reception, unusual for a female poet in Central America at this time. The praise that Lars received was again delivered in gendered terms. One critic, Rómulo Tovar, enthusiastically lauded her poetry, praising its “maternity” and employing adjectives such as infantil, pueril, sencillo and humilde to describe her lyric persona:

El reino de la poesía [...] en ella es infantil, es religiosamente infantil.

Su poesía es rito y ritmo. Es ritmo: cada poema es una oración,
oración a un dios apolíneo que es niño, estrella o flor.

[...]

En Claudia Lars la poesía es maternidad. Es creación íntima y
entrañable. Porque es eso, es pueril.

[...]

Los versos aquí son la glorificación de la maternidad. De una
maternidad verdadera y no retórica o de una maternidad cristiana
como la que canta Gabriela Mistral.

[...]

Su verso es sencillo y humilde. No es retocado. (185)

In a separate review, Leon Pacheco focused on her tremendous ability as a female poet, stating that hers was “un canto vital salido del alma de una mujer... la poesía auténtica con que se une al arte la teoría femenina” (160). He also distinguished her from other female poets, writing that “tiene algo que falta casi en todas las poetisas de claridad clásica: sentido lírico, asombro de pertenecer al mundo y poder decirlo, con un tono de elegía insumisa” (160). Like other critics, Pacheco could not resist linking Lars to motherhood, as he maintained that the poems written to her little son were the best in the book.

The divine representation of a maternal speaker throughout Estrellas en el pozo is rooted in sexual difference. The speaker’s exaltation of traditional feminine roles, such as mother and female mystic, reinforces stereotypes of woman as passive receiver of God the Father’s inspiration. It also characterizes Lars, by way of her verse, as a devoted Catholic mother. The poetic persona that Lars affected during her early writing years influenced how she was viewed as a person: her reviews in Repertorio americano characterize her as a consummate mother who is also a poet. Lars as the “good mother” continues to inform how she is remembered as a person. Despite extramarital affairs, divorce, continent-wide travel and participation in male-dominated literary circles, González Hugué writes that “en esos años [de la escritura de Estrellas en el pozo], Claudia se convierte en una mujer hecha y derecha, al pasar por la experiencia de un primer amor contrariado, el matrimonio y la maternidad”

(109). Certainly such a characterization—as a “mujer hecha y derecha” who, implicitly, did not threaten social or literary convention—would have helped the poet sell her first books and be accepted by the literary establishment in her day insofar as she would not have posed a threat to masculinity or patriarchal social structure. Significantly, by being known as a “mujer hecha y derecha” or a “mujer generosa y piadosa” (Tovar 185), Lars also would have gained credibility as a poet writing from a “feminine” position. By becoming entangled with the written subjects of her poems, from a marketing standpoint Lars benefited from a strategic mix of subjectivities and poetisa identity. Ever the poet-mother, just as Sobalvarro was the poet-muse, Lars was presented as inoffensive and non-threatening to her readers. She was able to cross the threshold into the public sphere and the Central American literary canon because she was not viewed as transgressive. The cultural work of her persona as poet-mother also likely attributed to her place in the twentieth-century literary canon, as her image provided a war-torn El Salvador with a pacific maternal figure that could unite her children through her verse.

As this chapter demonstrates, examining the literary, cultural and emotional work of early female poets’ writings can open the figure and the poetry of the poetisa to critical possibilities beyond gendered stereotypes. Writing about the public dimension of poetry in North American society, Rubin states that “the meanings of texts are inseparable from the ideological and cultural tensions in play at sites for reading” (Songs 8-9). Analogously, it is by studying the early twentieth century’s gendered reactions to modernity in Central American women’s writing that the

poetisa can be understood and appreciated in terms of literary and cultural evaluations. A critical look at poetisas' reception from the literary salon to reviews in periodicals sheds light on the various roles that female poets played in the literary world of 1930s Central America. Closely related, an assessment of female poets' marketing strategies—both through their verse and their public perception—demonstrates how early female poets negotiated a rigid behavior code through poetic language, revealing possibilities of social and political criticism in their published verse. These same strategies reveal how other female poets asserted their literary abilities by appropriating the styles of well-regarded poets, such as Bécquer and Darío. Taken into account together, the self-projection and reception of the poetisa also point to the consolidation of a Central American middlebrow culture, in that, by marrying consumerism with the high art of poetry, the poetisa effectively expanded the ways in which Central American men and women could participate in literary culture.

At the beginning of the last century, the conservative societies of Central America (which, socio-economically speaking, also made up most of the reading public) needed an image of modern womanhood that could counter that of the flapper, a model imported from the United States that was considered by the Anti-Academia to be “bastarda y espúrea, además de inadaptable en nuestro ambiente” (“Prólogo solo” 28). As Unruh has shown, the poetisa fit this bill in that she participated in modern society both by consuming books (and other goods) and occupying the public sphere of the printed page. Unlike the oversexed, wild,

boyishly-shaped flapper, however, the ideal poetess was sweet, romantic, maternal and feminine. Her poetry not only did not threaten the masculine literary establishment, but it provided male vanguards of Central America (such as the Anti-Academia in Nicaragua or Asturias and Cardoza y Aragón in Guatemala) with a counterpoint against which they could define themselves and watch themselves grow. The poetisa was familiar and endearing, a nostalgic reminder of a time before modernization and the arrivals of the U.S. Marines and the United Fruit Company. Her poetry was uncomplicated and accessible to a new middle class eager to display their appreciation and understanding for poetry and other fine arts. For these reasons, her poems were frequently found in schools and salons, where they were happily received and recited. In the chapters to follow, we will see how early Central American female poets took advantage of this uncritical reception by furthering agendas of women's liberation and equality on the social and political stages.

As we have seen, Central American female poets negotiated their status as poetisas through their poetry in different ways. Sobalvarro, whose surviving poems disclose a painfully whimsical posmodernista aesthetic, allowed herself to be cast as muse and played this role until she could no longer tolerate national politics, when she fell completely silent. As the “novia” to the Nicaraguan vanguards, who would go on to support Somoza, her tragic story and poetic offer little hope for a feminist reading and redemption. Meanwhile, in Honduras, Ochoa Velásquez and Fausta Ferrera display their poetic abilities by writing formally complex, modernista verse

abounding in classical allusions. Whereas Ochoa's poetic trajectory shows a slow shift to a more interior, posmodernista aesthetic, her poetry can never be described as intimate because she always foregrounds her formal and linguistic talent as if constantly proving her right to be part of the lettered city. Ferrera, on the other hand, democratizes the lettered city: by way of her content, she deconstructs the high-culture associations of her modernista versification and lexicon. Lars, the only Central American female poet to gain canonical status, uses the poetisa stereotype as a marketing strategy, and Spínola uses it to disguise potentially subversive poetry about her dead husband. Finally, Spínola's Guatemalan compatriot, de Wyld, takes the poetisa stereotype to a new level. Uncritically and unabashedly marrying poetics with commercial advertising and society page appeal, de Wyld becomes the caricature of poetisa aesthetics and middlebrow poetics, a gendered embodiment of the modern consumer culture to excess.

Poetisas and their poetry played a pivotal role in early twentieth-century literary culture in Central America. Beyond conveniently providing male writers with a counterpoint against which to posture themselves, they also provided a growing middle class—still apprehensive about the changes modernity had imposed on them—with a comforting, controllable image of women while advancing their presence in the public sphere. Seemingly lacking in feminist agenda, the figure of the poetisa was nevertheless crucial to how the female writer gained a foothold in the lettered city because she provided society with a non-threatening image. In this way, the poetisa marks an important coordinate in the twentieth-century literary history in

Central America. Only in reference to this point can we begin to navigate and gauge the poetic risks and innovations made by these early female poets. First billed as imitators by their male counterparts, the poetisas soon distinguished themselves not only as able colleagues, but as elite poets in their own rights.

Notes

¹ Similarly, literary historian Susan Suleiman describes one of the hallmarks of the French avant-gardes as “a critique of outmoded artistic practices with an ideological critique of bourgeois thought” (12; my emphasis). Given the absolute lack of women in the early European avant-gardes (Suleiman 27), this critique also would have been gendered in favor of a masculinist call for aesthetic and social change.

² For the Anti-Academia, rubendarismo referred to the now outdated, overdone movement begun by Nicaraguan poet, Rubén Darío. They recognized that those poets still writing modernista verse in the 1920s and 30s were imitators—not innovators—and that it was time to renovate Nicaraguan literature in a nationalist show of anti-imperialism.

³ I will elaborate on some of these ideas in Chapter 2, but for more on modernization and the gendered anxieties it provoked, see Felski.

⁴ Only in recent years has the word poeta in Spanish taken a feminine article to refer to the female genders, with the ending -isa taking on a diminutive, even derogatory connotation. According to the Real Academia Española’s Diccionario panhispánico de dudas (2005), “El femenino tradicional y más usado es poetisa... Modernamente se utiliza también la forma poeta como común en cuanto al género (“poeta –tisa”). I find it significant that the Spanish term poetisa takes a gendered diminutive form like no other profession can: for example, it would sound absurd to say, “escritorisa” for female writer or “mediquisa” for female doctor.

⁵ Arellano quickly qualified this observation by noting his unflagging admiration for Nicaraguan poets, Aura Rostand (1905-1959), Olga Solari (1910-1974), and María Teresa Sánchez ([1918]-1994).

⁶ Historian Ralph Woodward writes, “Newspapers, magazines and book shops became more common. By 1895 Guatemala alone had thirty-three newspapers, including five dailies in the capital” (173-74). In an interview with Arturo Arias, Guatemalan poet Carlos Illescas remembers several bookstores, libraries, and printing presses that were operating in his country in the 1930s and 40s (La identidad 240-42).

⁷ Interestingly, El Imparcial always featured stories about female declaimers on the society page (page 5) instead of page 3, which normally covered cultural and literary events. In this way, the newspaper further implied a distinction between women’s literary activities and those of men.

⁸ Irwin cites Nervo’s popularity in Mexico and this poet’s exaltation in María Luisa Garza’s La novia de Nervo (140-42).

⁹ I do not mean to suggest that women were not also among the poetic vanguard in Latin America; as we will see throughout my study, several female poets distinguished themselves with strikingly original poetic form and content. What I mean to stress is that the sentimental poetic modes abandoned by the avant garde continued to be popular, despite literary history’s traditional implying that they had waned.

¹⁰ Darío's poem, "Margarita, está linda la mar," is recited by the protagonist in the Guatemalan film, El silencio de Neto (1994), suggesting the nationalist resonance of the poet in other Central American nations, as well.

¹¹ Kirkpatrick, on the other hand, complicates both the notion of posmodernismo as a separate movement unto itself, as well as posmodernismo as a continuation of modernismo. Examining the modernista influences of Ramón López Velarde, César Vallejo and Alfonsina Storni—respectively classified as posmodernista, vanguardista and posmodernista by most literary historians—Kirkpatrick writes, "it would be foolish to declare them mere continuers of the vestiges of an earlier poetic tradition" (241).

¹² Sobalvarro's official inclusion as a member of the Anti-Academia is significant in that, according to Suleiman, "between 1924 and 1933, during the most dynamic and 'ascendant' period of the movement, not a single woman was included as an official member" (29).

¹³ See Appendix A for full text versions of three of Sobalvarro's poems, originally published in Nicaragua's El Gráfico, that have never been anthologized. This appendix also contains praise of the poet from the Honduran press and a photo. Lost are the two newspapers that would have had more of her written work, as well as the most clues about the poet's reception by the Anti-Academia. Arellano's archives contain the bibliographic information for these papers, but he attributes their destruction to poor maintenance of the national archives during the 1980s wars. This

lost bibliography is as follows: José Coronel Urtecho's "Carmen Sobalvarro, o la poesía espontánea" in El diario nicaraguense (17 mayo 1931) and "Presentación y poemas de Carmen Sobalvarro" in Rincón de Vanguardia in El correo (25 jun 1931).

¹⁴ Even though Sobalvarro wore make-up and had her hair in a bob (see Fig. 1 in Appendix A)—two signs of a modern New Woman—her beauty must have made her quintessentially feminine for the group and therefore premodern. For more on the fashion and the New Woman, see Dumenil. For more on the feminine as a symbol of the premodern, see Felski.

¹⁵ Early Sandinistas seem to have actively projected a sweet, feminine side in their campaigns. In 1929, El Imparcial ran an article on Sandino's North American propaganda, which featured the photo of a seated young woman who resembles Sobalvarro in that she has a pretty face, bobbed hair, and finely painted lips ("Propaganda sandinista"). With her hemline hitting above the knees and a becoming pair of ribboned slippers, her fashion is quite modern, but a multiple string of pearls around her neck also suggests refinement and femininity.

¹⁶ Miguel Ángel Asturias's early poetry, for example, consists of many standard attempts at romantic or postmodernista sonnets (See, for example, his Sonetos [1936] and early poems of Sien de alondra [1948]).

¹⁷ Horan writes that this salon "was no place for elitists [...] Rather, it was a political, literary and educational center" (The Subversive Voices 13). A comprehensive study remains to be done on Carmen Lyra's and Joaquín García

Monge's (editor of Repertorio americano) leadership of Costa Rica's literary community and how it enfranchised female artists and writers.

¹⁸ In Nicaragua, tertulias still enjoy cultural prestige. During my August 2007 visit to Nicaragua, for example, I was invited to the home of a well-known family in Managua that boasts several poets among its ranks. After dinner, I was held as a captive audience in what the family called a tertulia, in which I was forced to read, listen to and comment on the family's poetry. When I told Arellano about this experience, he invited me to a "real" poetry tertulia in Granada at the family home of poets Francisco de Asis Fernández and Gloria Gabuardi.

¹⁹ Of notable exception to those Guatemalan female poets published in Nosotras are the following: Malín de Echevers (a.k.a. Amalia Chévez), María Antonieta Freyre, Marta Josefina, Celia Treviño and Margot Lainfiesta. These women were all published in El Imparcial, and I have found no reason as to why they never appeared in the pages of Nosotras.

²⁰ De Wyld published three books in the 1930s: Pinceladas (1934), Arrullos (1935) and Destellos del alma (1936). In 1938, Acuña published La gavilla de Ruth, and Alarcón published Llamaradas. Other members of the Nosotras Generation who would go on to publish books of their own were Del Pilar, with Onix (1939), and A. de la Roca, with Auras primaverales (1938?). No known copies remain of these latter two books, but they were mentioned in Zea Ruano's thesis and promoted in Nosotras.

²¹ Perhaps due to Valle's and other women writers' hard work, the year 1938 was pivotal for female poets in Guatemala. This year not only witnesses the publication of Colección lila, but also the books of Acuña, Alarcón, del Pilar and de la Roca. Also in this year, the numbers of female poets featured in El Imparcial dramatically increases in comparison to years past.

²² The anthology does offer some poetic innovations. Acuña's opening poem, "Liberación," features atoms and airplanes. Spínola writes well-crafted sonnets. Luna's "Deseo" features an erotic theme reminiscent of Clementina Suárez in Honduras.

²³ The only exception to Colección lila's neglect is Albizurez's Historia, which mentions the anthology in passing only with reference to Luna (294). He fails to mention del Pilar at all and does not cite Acuña's or Spínola's involvement with the project in their biographies or bibliographies.

²⁴ For more on the feminization of consumer culture, see Felski, The Gender of Modernity.

²⁵ The monochromatic images printed in color, as well as the creative uses of typeface and page layouts, mirror the style of the upbeat magazine, suggesting that de Wyld was either largely influenced by Nosotras (which also promoted her books) or that Valle and her editorial team helped de Wyld design and publish her books.

²⁶ Literary critic Arturo Arias writes that the Wyld family was not part of the oligarchy (La identidad 68). This being the case, it can be assumed that those

women and children adorning the pages of de Wyld's books were, like the author, of the middle and upper-middle class.

²⁷ Many of the dedications to de Wyld's poems, as well as those to various poems published in Nosotras by poetisas, indicate that the poems were character sketches intended for girlfriend's albums. They commonly read, "Para el álbum de..."

²⁸ Spínola's friend, poet Angelina Acuña, remembers the horror of this period and the anxiety caused by their friendship:

Conocí a Magda allá por el año 38, 4 o 5 años después de que fusilaran a su esposo... Por aquella época Magda se encontraba viviendo una situación muy difícil. Recuerdo que en esos años yo vivía en una casa cuya sala daba a la calle y en las ventanas tenía una cortina a través de la cual se podía ver desde afuera; en esa sala yo tenía sobre el piano una foto de Magdalena y no sé si era mi temor pero constantemente sentía que pasaba la policía varias veces para chequear si se trataba del retrato de Magda. (in Aguilar 55)

²⁹ Lars's inspiration by Lorca also testifies to how widely read the Spanish poet was in Central America. Insofar as Lars writes her 1937 "Romance del romancero gitano" about Lorca's murder at the hands of fascists, Lorca's invocation and influence throughout Canción redonda can be read as a political statement against all political tyranny.

³⁰ Trujillo, et. al., attribute this state censorship to the development of a woman's page in El Imparcial and women's magazines, whose gendered content was not viewed as threatening to Ubico's regime (46-7). In a similar, ironic twist, this oppression made room for the development of women's literary voice, both in the women's pages and literary pages.

³¹ For recent scholarship on recovering the Salvadoran peasant massacre to popular memory, see Tilley's Seeing Indians and Lindo Fuentes's Remembering a Massacre in El Salvador.

³² Exceptions are poems like "Dime" and "La niña d'El Salvador," which read as children's poems that tell a story in verse. The implied reader of these nursery rhymes is likely a child, possibly the son who is addressed in the other poems of the collection.

³³ Claudia Lars was the pseudonym for Carmen Brannon.

Chapter 2

Eroticism and the Modern Woman

¿Debe el marido tener que decir algo en la selección de los vestidos de su mujer? [...] El marido que, queriendo ser “hombre macho”, se toma interés y hasta llega a imponer su criterio en la selección de los vestidos que ha de usar su mujer, invariablemente la convierte en una pobre imitación o una caricatura de él.

—Mariana Mays Martín, “¡Ay de los maridos críticos!

Sobre la Mujer Moderna,” El Imparcial

[Guatemala] 6 enero 1934: 5.

In 1930, Costa Ricans flocked to the capital’s theatres to watch their country’s first full-length feature film, El retorno, which displayed all the modern marvels of San José: the railroad, cars, short skirts, manicured parks, stunning monuments and public buildings, and streets lined with business. After its successful debut, however, the film was shown only a few more times before it was confiscated by the family of Dorita Odio, the San José actress who played foreign actress Dorita Venilesko in the film, because it was, in fact, too modern for conservative social mores. Not only was the family scandalized by Dorita’s portrayal of a femme fatale who danced on stage, but also, according to journalist Marcela Quiros, by the movie’s “tomas de piernas, personas tomándose de las manos y uno que ‘hacía’ de ladrón” (in Cortés 51). Worried about their reputation, as well as the possible corruption of the Costa Rican people, the family had the film locked in the vault of

the Cine Variedades until it was rescued in 1995 by the Centro Costarricense de Producción Cinematográfica and shown publicly to commemorate 100 years of film in Costa Rica in 1997.¹

Both the controversy around El retorno and the film's content provide a useful frame for this chapter, which will illustrate female poets' participation in the fashioning of the Central American modern woman. The reaction to El retorno, as well as the film, itself, demonstrate what Rita Felski and other critics have called a "gendered anxiety" about modernity and the ways it would change society. In *The Gender of Modernity*, Felski writes, "The figure of woman pervades the culture of the fin de siècle as a powerful symbol of both the dangers and the promises of the modern age" (3). At this time, feminists and socially and economically liberated women were seen both as fashionable icons of the modern age and as threats to the social fabric. The latter case was often accompanied by representations of modern women as hysterical, overly masculine, materialistic, or mechanized.² In 1930s Central America, as in other parts of the globe, representations of women (and to a lesser degree, of men) were often inflected with such anxieties about modernization. This gendered anxiety is projected on screen through the fetishization of Dorita, who will serve as a figure for examining the Central American poetisas. Like Dorita, these poets were objects of the public gaze as they re-fashioned the modern woman in the region in their writing. Specifically, I will look at the erotic poetry published by Nicaraguans Olga Solari (1910-1974) and María Teresa Sánchez ([1918]-1994), Costa Rican Fresia Brenes de Hilarova, and Hondurans Alma Fiori (1907-1952) and

Clementina Suárez (1902-1991). Before turning to these poets and to El retorno's Dorita, however, it is necessary to understand the impacts of modernization on the isthmus in the 1930s and to provide a context for the arrival and staying power of the modern woman.

In global terms, the decade of the 1930s generally brings to mind financial depression and the rise of fascism in Europe. In Central America, the depression and fascism of this period were uniquely experienced under the ubiquitous arms of the United Fruit Company (UFC). Historian Edelberto Torres Rivas points out that after the international financial crisis of 1929, Central America did not feel the brunt of the worldwide depression of the 1930s, in part because the peasant economy was able to absorb the hit and also because banana prices remained stable (31). He writes that the depression was mostly felt in terms of financial reforms and cutbacks from the UFC and national governments, resulting in fewer and more expensive imports, weakened domestic consumption and drastic cuts in public spending (76). A surprising effect of these budget cuts was the creation of small surpluses in the 1930s, which resulted in unspent savings in Guatemala and El Salvador and even a balanced budget in the former country (75). Torres Rivas tells us that Honduras and Nicaragua, on the other hand, were forced into internal debt as they shrunk public spending to the lowest possible level, thus defending landowners' interests and deepening the economic divide between this group and the peasantry (75-6). Despite the positive effects of budget cuts in El Salvador noted by Torres Rivas, Tilley writes that the market crash gravely affected coffee exports, contributing to mass

unemployment of the indigenous peasants and leading to the 1931-32 revolt and subsequent massacre (135). According to Piero Gleijeses, Guatemala's coffee market collapsed in 1929, leaving the economy bankrupt (11). Kenneth Grieb explains, however, that Ubico's strong arm in that country stabilized the economy in the 1930s, even leading to the development of a significant middle class (34). He writes that, although the Guatemalan oligarchy suffered from world economic devastation, the country's middle class and the indigenous poor also benefited from the vast public works projects of Ubico's regime (35).³

Bolstered by U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, which fostered diplomacy and trade relations over military intervention as a way of maintaining political and economic influence in Latin America, the UFC reigned supreme in the Central American republics whose leaders were regularly manipulated by the corporate interests of the banana magnate.⁴ As the UFC relied on the peonage of its workers to ensure the low cost of bananas to North American consumers, it also ushered development—albeit uneven—to the area by constructing boom towns for workers and foreign managers. Historian Charles David Kepner writes that, in addition to luxurious quarters for the company's upper-level employees and labor barracks painted “malarial yellow,” these towns had “railroad shops, roundhouses, freight yards, wharves, lighthouses, water works, sewerage systems, commissary stores, storehouses, electric light plants, bakeries, laundries, schools and churches, hotels, clubhouses, and athletic fields,” as well as radio stations and hospitals (Kepner Social Aspects 17-18). When the soil was depleted or

disease wrecked plantations—usually within eight to ten years of a plantation’s founding—the company vacated the premises, taking with it valuable infrastructure (literally ripping out railroad tracks and bridges) and leaving devastated workers and land in its wake (Kepner Social Aspects 19).

In what can be seen in retrospect as an early case study of García Canclini’s uneven modernities in Latin America, Central America experienced fleeting modernization in areas that were strategic to the UFC’s banana or shipping interests.⁵ Nevertheless, most agricultural workers lived in slave-like conditions and would never have the economic means to own to the modern consumer goods, such as pantyhose and home movie cameras, displayed at the company store or in paid advertisements in periodicals and on the radio. Moreover, the peasant classes living outside banana zones had little or no contact with this modernization. Central America’s middle and upper classes, however, were able to enjoy the benefits of improved infrastructure and communications systems. They could take advantage of the UFC’s ships, the Great White Fleet, that allowed them to cruise leisurely to New Orleans, New York, Havana or the other Central American republics. In fact, Guatemala’s Olivia de Wyld includes a paid advertisement for la Gran Flota Blanca in her 1936 poetry collection, Destellos del alma (92). They could also travel at will by newly-constructed highways, including the Pan-American Highway, or railroads within their own country or to other countries. Moreover, luxury consumer items, imported for UFC management and the upper and middle classes, were included among the inventories of Central American retailers who catered to those who could

afford their wares. The paid advertisements in de Wyld's Arrullos (1935) and Destellos del alma (1936) attest to a growing consumerism among Guatemala's middle class that, in turn, contributed to the production and perception of literature as a consumer good.

Although the 1930s in Central America cannot be described as “roaring” as the 1920s in the US and Europe, a gendered anxiety with relation to modernity can be seen among Central America's privileged classes throughout this decade of rapid modernization.⁶ Although this gendered anxiety was expressed through representations of both sexes, as my study profiles women's poetry, I am going to limit my focus to women, especially the image of the mujer moderna, or “modern woman,” as she was commonly called in Central American media of the era.⁷ Described by historian Lynn Dumenil, the modern woman, called the “New Woman” in the United States, was most readily identified with the flapper, a slender young woman who wore “a minimum of undergarments, short skirts, filmy fabrics and sheer hose” (135).⁸ According to Guatemalan women's historians Trujillo, Borrayo, and Santa Cruz, “la primera imagen de la mujer que apareció [en las páginas de El Imparcial, fundado en junio de 1922] fue la de las prostitutas londinenses, un artículo sobre la vida en Londres titulado: ‘La Flapper’, firmado por Juan Pujol” (89). They tell us that the next story featuring women appeared two months later in August 1922 and was about Madame de Fanfare, the director of a French fashion magazine (89). The flapper sought to attain a “boyish look” that was achieved in part through “bobbed hair, a release from the weight of tradition that required women to grow

their hair long” (135). Smoking, drinking, heavy cosmetics and jazz dancing completed the flapper’s image of emancipation from the restricting social customs of the past.

Although the flapper enjoyed a presence in Central America, her influence there in the 1930s appears to give way to a more professional version of modern womanhood. My research into Guatemalan editorial content of the 1930s indicates a tendency to identify the modern woman with one who occupied the public sphere by entering the work force and/or yielding consumer power. Mapping similar trends in North America, historian Estelle Freedman argues that the flapper was not the definitive role model for North American women, either. She cites the relationship between women’s emancipation in the 1920s and increased modernization, which included urbanization, “a rising standard of living, more household appliances, and compulsory public education [that] provided women with unprecedented leisure time which enabled them to join women’s clubs or enter the work force” (381).⁹ As we shall see, these same economic trends were felt in Central America in the late 1920s and 1930s, giving rise to the Central American modern woman in the upper and middle classes.¹⁰ Having had access to higher education, the modern woman was no longer satisfied with just keeping house and mothering. It was this desire to be something more (assert her voice in her marriage, wear the latest fashion, vote, drive, etc.) that threatened social conservatives who only saw a woman’s roles as housewife and mother. Ideas of what constituted the ideal Central American woman were even intersected with class and race because, as Trujillo, et. al., point out, prior

to the 1930s, few upper-class, white women worked outside the home because it was not financially necessary for them to do so (83). Domestic service jobs and some jobs in commerce and the physical labor force were performed by women of the lower economic classes and by women of color.

Most ostensibly, the modern woman made her presence known on the isthmus, as in the rest of Latin America, through imported Hollywood films and print media. In Guatemala, the women's magazines Nosotras, Azul, and Alma de América ran in-depth coverage on Hollywood gossip, as did national newspapers, El Imparcial in Guatemala and El Gráfico in Nicaragua. In 1940, for example, Azul boasted extensive coverage on Lo que el viento se llevó (Gone with the Wind), even featuring Scarlet O'Hara on its cover.¹¹ Although initially imported, however, the modern woman's presence in Central America was experienced and discussed in ways specific to the region's cultures and uneven modernities. For example, in her 1923 introduction to Lecturas para mujeres, Gabriela Mistral describes "la 'mujer nueva'" as "una traición a la raza, a la cual socavamos en sus cimientos" (8; original emphasis). Reading Mistral's work, Elizabeth Marchant interprets the poet's championing of the mujer antigua over the mujer nueva as an act of resistance meant to solidify the home as a site of women's power. Indeed, the modern woman was viewed by both traditionalists and revolutionary feminists (such as Apristas, Magda Portal and Amanda Labarca, who were regular contributors to Costa Rica's Repertorio americano) as a frivolous threat to the patriarchal family on the one hand and class-based struggle on the other. Always a point of contention, the modern

woman embodied the cultural tension brought about by modernization's changes in Latin American society.

Recent critics have also observed the ubiquitous presence of the modern woman in Latin America. Unruh's Performing Women examines how female writers throughout Latin America constructed their modernity as modern women through performance. With respect to "the 'New Woman' in Honduras" and the changes she represented, Janet Gold writes, "These currents of rebellion and innovation caused ripples even in the staid waters of Tegucigalpa society" (76). In fact, they created ripples throughout the isthmus. As described in chapter 1, a conservative backlash of publications outlining "proper" behavior codes for women provides evidence that the presence of the modern woman was felt in Central America and was not necessarily welcome. Nevertheless, historian Ralph Woodward writes that

advertisements and motion pictures popularized [...] North American customs and gradually broke down more traditional Hispanic and Indian taboos regarding freedom of movement, sex, and morals. More employment opportunities became available to Central America's daughters, especially in government offices and, subsequently, in private businesses. (206)

Most of the female poets of this study also worked professionally as teachers and/or journalists. As the latter profession placed their voice in print in objective, fact-based prose, they were allowed access to the public sphere through a different

discourse than their poetry. The photographs of many of these poets also show them sporting the short, bobbed hair and heavy make-up that were the style for the Modern woman. On the political front, a large number of these poets also participated in the strong suffrage movements that were underway in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Costa Rica, with women winning the right to vote in El Salvador as early as 1939.¹² With the overthrow of Ubico in 1944, Guatemalan women also earned the right to vote, suggesting that a suffragist sentiment had been in place in the years leading up to Ubico's defeat.

Woodward writes that, as the Central American dictatorships tried in earnest to mimic the positivist reforms of the Porfiriato in Mexico, they constructed modern buildings, monuments, parks, airports, theatres, factories, and museums (204). For example, the Guatemalan city of Quetzaltenango, which was frequently lauded by poets of the day, stood out as the crown jewel of Central American modernity with its neoclassic architecture, Temple to Minerva, and the isthmus's first shopping arcade.¹³ Guatemala City soon followed with its arcades, El Portal, and showcased its modernity with a number of art deco buildings and homes.¹⁴ Insofar as these dictators were enabled both financially and politically by the UFC, the corporation can also be seen as indirectly responsible for these public works. For example, Chapman writes that Ubico fancied himself a little Mussolini, taking pride in the fact that Guatemala's trains (complements of the UFC) always ran on time (106). With the UFC and its Great White Fleet, tourism was also introduced to the region, resulting in bilingual publications that gave patronizing costumbrista descriptions of

Central American landscapes and peoples for visitors in both Spanish and English.¹⁵ The Pan-American Highway, large portions of which were completed in the 1930s, allowed for international travel by car. Additionally, Woodward notes that, with the introduction of modern machinery—such as the automobile, which afforded the opportunity for private, rapid transportation among the wealthy—new time for leisure activities was enjoyed by all classes (204-06). In addition to participating in new sports—such as bicycling, tennis, polo, soccer, and baseball—Central Americans embraced Hollywood movies and read daily newspapers as never before. Again, it was largely the investments of the UFC in the volatile national economies that allowed a burgeoning middle class to engage in leisure time.

Manifestations of modernization—such as new machinery, tourism, and leisure activities—were not absent from Central American poetry of the 1930s; in fact, modern technology was a common motif among male and female poets, alike. For example, in her poetic version of the Nativity, Honduran Ángela Ochoa Velásquez (1886-1969) includes not only the typical bestiary of the manger, but also cars, airplanes, football players, and tourists (“El nacimiento en la aldea”). In “Nocturno,” this poet also describes her soul as a “cine solitario” (2). In “Mientras vuela el trimotor de La Ceiba a Tela” writes about the “sueño futurista” of “un avión que aterrice en la luna o en Marte: llevando a un burgués o manufacturero” (10, 11-12). Her compatriot, Fausta Ferrera (1891-1971) writes about “El canto del motor” and the limits of modern medical care in “En el hospital” and “En el sanatorio.” She also includes photos of modern San Pedro Sula, whose paved streets are lined with

telegraph poles and automobiles (Alas 98). Guatemalan Laura Rubio de Robles (1886-1975) encloses the first stanza of “Hacia Xelajú” with the refrain, “el auto camina...” (1, 4), thus underlining the importance of the automobile to the growing national tourist industry among the Guatemalan bourgeois.¹⁶ Nicaraguan María Teresa Sánchez ([1918]-1994) contrasts the excess and luxury of modern technology to the misery of the campesino, who humbly works the earth in “Labriegos”:

Carros veloces a sesenta millas;
 Albajas finas; ricas pedrerías;
 Champaña; música; alegría...
 ...y en la choza del indio
 Pobreza y melancolía.
 Bandejas de electroplata;
 Finas perfumerías;
 Luces de fosforescentes llamas...
 ...y la cabaña del indio
 Apenas cubierta de andrajos. (1-10)

As the first poem in Colección Lila, Angelina Acuña's (Guatemala, 1905-2006) “Liberación” acts as a kind of arte poética of modern emancipation for the 1938 anthology of Guatemalan female poets.

Ser átomo que vuela sin lastre ni pasiones
 En la senda emotiva de las contemplaciones;
 ¡bogar en el Misterio a bordo del avión

palpitante y tremendo de la Liberación! (12-15)

Here nuclear physics and aviation take on cosmic, perhaps theosophical, attributes as the speaker joins atoms and airplanes in mystical flight.¹⁷

The fact that such modern images of airplanes and automobiles served as sources of poetic inspiration and content for these poets attests to the impact they had on Central American life, especially among the upper and middle classes, as Sánchez's "Labriegos" reiterates. With these images, Central American poets were able to emphasize that their region was not exempt from the modernization that was rapidly transforming the globe; in fact, they were fully participating in the modern experience. Moreover, the presence of such fast-paced images placed these female poets in dialogue with the avant-garde poetics of the day, especially futurism and ultraísmo, which abounded in references to new technologies and speed.

One of the most popular new leisure activities of the era in Central America (as elsewhere in the world), which was also the result of new technology, was the cinema.¹⁸ Few national cinemas existed in Latin America during the 1920s and 30s, as movie houses were dominated by imported films, mostly from Hollywood.¹⁹ In Magical Reels, film historian and critic John King writes that "audiences in Latin America flocked to the cinema" (8). The working classes in particular consumed Hollywood's escapist melodramas. King explains that, during the late 1930s, Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy relied heavily on Hollywood's film industry to export and form consumer tastes in Latin America (32). Readily accessible to almost any audience regardless of literacy, film came to represent the modern age in both

Latin America and the world, forming taste and ideologies by both representing and propagating modernization. Critic Jason Borge writes, “Lo que se encuentra ante todo en la crítica cinematográfica de las primeras décadas del siglo XX [en Latinoamérica] es una negociación de la modernidad” (18; original emphasis). Since film is seen as both a symbol and arbiter of modernity, it also inevitably manifests the gendered anxiety surrounding modernity in Central America. This anxiety is also clear in poetry written by Central American women in the 1930s, especially in terms of the masculinist gaze towards women first appearing in the public sphere.

Although no formal study on early film reception in Central America exists to date, my research of the Nicaraguan newspapers, El Gráfico and La Noticia, of this time has turned up multiple weekly reviews of Hollywood stars and popular films, thus attesting to the inundation of Central America by the U.S. film industry. Similarly, large sections of content in Guatemalan periodicals were dedicated to the Hollywood beat.²⁰ Salvadoran Alberto Masferrer’s novel, Una vida en el cine (1922, published 1955), also testifies to the presence of imported melodramatic motion pictures in El Salvador in the early 1920s. Costa Rican film critic and historian, María Lourdes Cortés, has extensively documented the history of film in Costa Rica. She writes that film arrived in Costa Rica in 1897 as an expensive form of entertainment for San José’s wealthy coffee exporters (25). Dominated initially by Europeans, film in Costa Rica (as elsewhere in Latin America) became a primarily North American industry after World War I, which caused economic recession in Europe and the temporary decline of European cinematic productions (34).

Nevertheless, Costa Rica was the only Central American country with its own national cinema, a fact which could have led that nation's more highbrow journal, Repertorio americano, to take a typically critical stance towards Hollywood cinema: it was in this journal that Mistral opined in 1926 that Hollywood's negative stereotypes of Mexicans adversely affected the perceptions of all Latin Americans ("La película enemiga").

In this atmosphere, the Diario de Costa Rica announced in March 1930 the coming of El retorno, "una película verdadera y netamente nacional" (in Cortés 35; my emphasis). The film, which was directed by Italian A.H. Bertoli, may be a debated representative of Costa Rican nationalism; however, critic Ana López points out that in the early twentieth century, the filmic medium in Latin America had a nationalist allure in that those countries that were able to represent themselves in moving pictures through their own film industry demonstrated that they possessed the quintessential marker of modernity ("Early Cinema" 61). Indeed, lauding the nascent Costa Rican film industry's filming of El retorno, La Tribuna pronounced, "HACER ARTE NACIONAL ES HACER PATRIA!!" (in Cortés 44).²¹ El retorno extols the capital city's modernity and beauty: San José, the intertitles tell us, is the "corazón y cerebro del país."²² Modernity is thus equated with Costa Rican nationalism, suggesting the country's embrace of the changes that came with it. A feminist analysis of the film, however, exposes a more unsteady relationship with modernization, especially as it is embodied by the film's leading actress, who also plays an actress, Dorita Odio.

El retorno follows the story of Rodrigo, the prodigal nephew of a wealthy hacendero from Cartago. Before leaving the hacienda for law school in San José, Rodrigo proposes to Eugenia, his first cousin who is described in an intertitle as a “flor virginal.” Once in the capital, however, Rodrigo falls in love with Dorita Venilesko, the “célebre artista internacional,” who is performing at the beautiful Teatro Nacional, the modern gem of San José. With his new friend, Cupido, the gossip columnist who is following Rodrigo’s arrival to the city, Rodrigo meets with Dorita in her suite at the Gran Hotel. Then Cupido takes a lovesick Rodrigo out drinking, and Rodrigo explains that while he loves Eugenia “serenamente,” he loves Dorita with passion. When Dorita’s jewels are found missing, Cupido and Rodrigo are charged with the crime and sent to jail. The scandal is broadcast throughout the society pages, and Rodrigo’s uncle disowns him. Meanwhile, Dorita maintains her friends’ innocence, insisting that the real thief be caught. When the hotel’s mayordomo is found with the jewels, Rodrigo and Cupido are set free. Having learned his lesson, Rodrigo returns to the hacienda, where he receives his uncle’s pardon and Eugenia’s hand in marriage.²³

Gendered anxieties abound in El retorno and are revealed with respect to both male and female characters. According to William Miranda Bogantes of the CCPC, Cupido was played by Abelardo Castro, known in real life as “El Gordo de las Revistas” for directing the newspaper El Diario and for his black market dealings in pornography magazines. It is notable that Cupido is portrayed in the film as a dandy whose flamboyant, effeminate behavior and mannerisms would be immediately

understood in today's world as stereotypically homosexual. Cupido insists, however, that he is a ladies' man and all women are in love with him, including Dorita. With Dorita and Rodrigo, Cupido completes the possibility of what Eve Sedgwick has called a homoerotic triangle, where Dorita's presence displaces homosexual feelings between Cupido and Rodrigo, the only two characters of the film who are developed. Interpreted this way, El retorno offers multi-faceted representations of gender and sexuality in 1930s Costa Rica, in that it not only problematizes women's roles, but also concepts of masculinity.

Neither the characters of Eugenia or Dorita are developed: they are typecast simply as the good girl and the femme fatale. Eugenia represents the healthy purity of the countryside, as well as the respectability of Costa Rica's planter class. She passively waits for Rodrigo to return to her as she is portrayed melancholically combing her hair or staring out a window. Dorita, representative of the modern, corrupting city, has more agency: she is a professional, tells Rodrigo that she does not love him, grants Cupido an interview, and threatens the hotel management and detectives when they do not find her jewels. Whereas Eugenia never leaves the hacienda, Dorita, an international star, is mobile. Aside from her dancing on stage at the Teatro Nacional and entertaining male guests in her hotel suite, however, Dorita is not portrayed as the seductive temptress typical of the filmic archetype of the femme fatale. In fact, for serving as the film's "bad girl," she is remarkably bland. In this regard, she is somewhat reminiscent of the North American Ziegfeld Girl of the 1910s and 20s, whose sexuality is described by Linda Mizejewski as "regimented

and controlled, vacuumed of sweat and passion” (9). Like the Ziegfeld Girl, however, Dorita is fetishized both through her glamorous portrayal and the shot of her solo dancing on stage. Fully clothed and revealing little flesh, it is the glamour of these showgirls—announced through the artifice of performance—that over-endows them with meaning. Their glamour and costume signify conspicuous consumption, and their position on stage or in advertisements likens them to retail mannequins. In this way, they cast their viewers into the position of the Benjaminian flaneur and render the showgirl an object of commodity fetishism.²⁴ The showgirl’s glamour thus disavows any threat she might represent to masculine hegemony, representing instead the economic power—still coded masculine—of the flaneur, who consumes her image either by purchasing it or through his gaze. In this way, the threat of female independence (and, by extension, other modern changes) represented by Dorita is controlled on the screen, but this control is made possible only through the gendered mechanisms of modern commercialism.

Fetishism aside, fashion’s ambiguities also allow Dorita to perform a cosmopolitan, autonomous image of womanhood that could be obtained by Central American women who had the financial wherewithal to travel and live on their own and to consume modern fashion (again linking fashion to consumerism). She embodies—albeit somewhat unadventurously for the conservative Costa Rican public—the phenomenon of the modern woman, described in the North American context by Dumenil as “a telling marker, a symbol, of modernity itself” (98). The values that Dorita represents can be seen in the portraits and descriptions of many

Central American female poets from the 1930s, who, like flappers, bobbed their hair and used heavy cosmetics as they fashioned modern selves in societies that demanded more conventional behavior (see figure 1; also see Appendix A and B for images of poets Carmen Sobalvarro and Aura Rostand, respectively). In this way, they, like North American flappers, signified what Dumenil defines as “physical freedom and enhanced sexuality,” as well as a “rejection of traditional standards of behavior” (135). For example, in his introduction to De mis sábados el último, Hernán Robleto described Clementina Suárez as a “muchachilla de veinte años que tiene ojeras moradas, cabellera a la bob y labios carmesíes [...] rouge para los labios, lápices para los ojos y una motita que aviva el calor tropical de las mejillas” (v-vi). Occupying the public, traditionally masculine, sphere through print media and recitals, many of the female poets of this study presented themselves as modern women in their public images. Like Dorita, they embodied modernity, commodifying it as they marketed their verse.

These poets, like Dorita, circulated modern values not only through their styles of clothing and behavior, but also through their poetry’s form and content, which was consumed in the public spaces of the theatre or print media. As mentioned earlier, many female poets also escaped the boundaries of feminine domestic space by working outside the home, often as either teachers or journalists.²⁵ Also like Dorita, nearly all of these poets were well-traveled, having lived abroad for study, leisure or political exile. Among those who traveled or lived abroad were poets Claudia Lars, Alice Lardé, Fresia Brenes de Hilarova, Gris, Magdalena

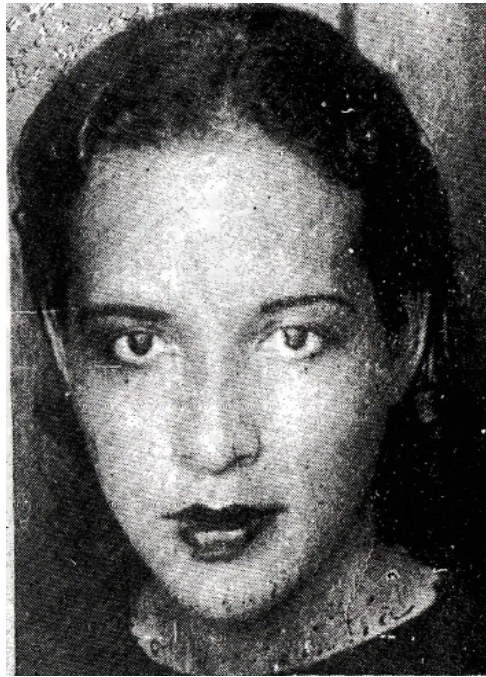


Fig. 1. Portrait of poet María Teresa Sánchez, Sombras (Managua: Talleres Gráficos Pérez, 1930): 5. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Spínola, Laura Rubio de Robles, Malín de Echevers, María Teresa Sánchez, Aura Rostand, Romelia Alarcón de Folgar and Clementina Suárez.²⁶ Exiled poets included Ámparo Casamalhuapa, Mercedes Maití de Luarca, Carmen Sobalvarro and Olga Solari. Anecdotes of wild, flapper-esque behavior follow several poets. Gold, for example, documents Suárez's unconventional lifestyle throughout her biography. Likewise, in an interview Arellano fondly remembered Sánchez for having smoked long cigarettes and wearing dark red lipstick. He also recalls an outrageous evening, when she accompanied her husband and his male comrades to the movies. Wearing

pants and riding boots, she yielded a riding crop with which she pretended to “whip” the men into shape if they misbehaved.

Insofar as they represent modern women, Dorita and these poets can be seen as fashioning modern womanhood in 1930s Central America through their behavior and clothing, as well as their language, three interrelated systems of meaning or communication. While inspired by Unruh, who uses fashion to talk about gendered performance and the construction of personal habitus along class and gender lines in Storni and Galvao, here I engage fashion as a system of communication that, like poetry, constructs the Central American modern woman through plays on the ambiguities between sign and referent and determines her reception through the gendered power dynamics of the gaze. Fashion theorist Malcolm Bernard writes that, insofar as fashion and clothing are meaningful, they represent the values and beliefs of different cultures (137). He explains, “Communication through or by means of fashion and clothing, therefore, is a social interaction that produces or constitutes the individual as a member (or not) of a culture” (139). Accordingly, fashion statements are inseparable from the cultural context in which they occur, as they both constitute and are constituted by cultural values and beliefs: like language, clothing and culture are sign systems that depend on a shared code of meaning. Dorita and Central American female poets thus exploit the clothing, dance moves, behavior, and (as we shall see) poetic language that 1930s society associates with modernity in order to communicate that they are breaking with traditional roles for women.

As demonstrated above, fashion has often been linked to femaleness through consumerism and psychoanalytic theories of the gendered gaze.²⁷ Consequently, it is possible for the fashionable Dorita to function as both a gendered sign of consumption and as an arbiter of that sign: she is visually consumed by her spectators as she consumes (by purchasing and wearing) modern fashion. In this way, her presence on stage and film both underlines and undermines the possible threat of her modernity. On the one hand, her presence on stage and film emphasizes the independence, mobility, and agency that her public dancing represents. Accordingly, she transgresses the dichotomies between private and public space and between modesty and dancing that were still in place in 1930 San José for women of her social class. On the other hand, her position in front of (male) spectators reveals the sexual imbalance of power that film theorist Laura Mulvey has identified as “woman as image/man as bearer of the look” (442). As the objects of visual pleasure, Dorita and other public female figures are subjugated and consumed by the male gaze.²⁸

Female poets who appear in public space through print media can also be seen as both gendered signs and arbiters of consumption. Like Dorita, they capitalize on their individual styles (in clothing, behavior and language) and their position in the public sphere to assert their break from traditional roles for women, specifically the demure poetisa. Even though these writers extended the lettered city to include women and an increasing middle class (as discussed in chapter 1), they also became objects of their readers’ and critics’ gazes. Although early Central

American female poets' personae and texts lack filmic conventions, such as suture, that Mulvey argues are unique to cinematic scopophilia, the concept of the gaze nevertheless provides a germane approach to their poetry.²⁹ Recently, critic Susan McCabe has used gaze as a point of comparison between early cinematic production and modernist poetry, not only because the advents of cinema and modernism correspond historically, but also because both film and poetry of this time period challenge "the direction of the gaze" (3). McCabe's approach has influenced me to extend the effect of gaze, especially where it disrupts gendered power dichotomy, beyond the stage or screen to the world of letters. Because several female poets of this time did affect outrageously modern or eccentric behaviors and looks in the construction of their public selves, they cast themselves as novelties, or spectacles, in the public eye, thereby enacting a kind of scopophilia, or pleasure in looking at them. For example, Gold writes of Clementina Suárez: "In New York or Paris Clementina would have been a lot like many other young women experimenting with their identity, breaking rules, and exploring new territory. But in Tegucigalpa she was unique" (84). In this way, Suárez and other radical female poets provoked a gaze, but it is significant that their "to-be-looked-at-ness" did not merely result in their objectification and (re)fetishization as poetisas because they effectively exploited the gendered power dynamic of the gaze when they brazenly took the public spotlight. Although they did provoke a certain amount of scopophilia as public spectacles, they also promoted themselves in their poetry, recitals, media coverage, and other activities as models of the modern woman. By calling attention to the gaze that

might otherwise fetishize them, they exposed the power differential between men and women in the public eye. It is in this defining moment that many shed the objectifying label poetisa for the more respectful title, poeta.

Unruh demonstrates in Peforming Women that female writers use the novelty of their performance as an artifice that limits any real threat they might pose to masculine hegemony. She shows that it is precisely their novelty that allows them to enter the public realm and makes them worthy of public attention, of being published. Their fashioning of the modern woman does not disrupt the gaze, but rather the assumptions of power that enable an exclusively male spectatorship. In effect, they disrupt the dichotomy of “woman as image/man as bearer of the look,” for—as the capitalist system of fashion dictates—woman is the intended spectator of fashion because she is also the intended consumer. As Craik writes, “Despite the rhetoric that women dress to please men, other evidence suggest that women primarily dress to please other women” (56). Indeed, as I argued in chapter 1, female poets and women’s organizations engendered female readership both through a middlebrow culture and by providing women with female literary role models. In this way, the fashionable modern woman poets and their female readers expand the threshold of the lettered city, casting themselves both as images and bearers of the look. As such, they also refashion what it means to be “feminine” in the context of modernity, redefining gender roles so that women could access more of the freedoms available to men.

As Central American female poets were not fashion editors or runway models, they did not necessarily transform gender roles solely through what they wore. Instead, their poetry acted as a kind of clothing, visible signs that communicate individual subjectivity. This “poetic clothing” can be compared to what Barthes has called “written clothing” in The Fashion System. Barthes privileges written clothing (fashion writers’ descriptions of garments and styles) over image-clothing (or the clothing of fashion photography) because language can sometimes reveal more about the real clothing than can the photographic image: “every written word has a function of authority insofar as it chooses—by proxy, so to speak—instead of the eye. [...] Language makes it possible to deliver information which photography delivers poorly or not at all” (13). Language also mediates the visual image, affecting the public’s interpretations and perceptions of that image. Much in the way of Barthes’s written clothing, Central American female poets’ “poetic clothing” acts as a sign of the fashionable modern woman. As with words in written clothing, “poetic clothing” mitigates public interpretations of the modern woman on an often personal, subjective level. Through polysemy and the ability to assemble multiple subjectivities, poetry has the ability to communicate the complexities and staying power of the modern woman in Central America, whereas other images of the modern woman in visual and narrative media may give only a partial glimpse at her evolution in society.

“Poetic clothing” can be seen as part of what Foucault has referred to as a “technology of the self,” or that which allows “individuals to effect [...] a certain

number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection or immortality” (“Technologies of the Self” 18). Thus, poetry, like clothing, acts as a communicative system that an individual can manipulate to (re)create herself. To this end, Joanne Entwistle, who first saw fashion as a technology of the self in The Fashioned Body (1988) and to whom I owe my thinking here, states that “fashion responds to social and political changes, reflecting and reproducing these changes” (80). Indeed, as I argue in my introduction, poetry and fashion can also be seen as kinds of discourse, which respond to, reproduce, and revolutionize power in their cultural context. When seen thus, “poetic clothing” acts as a technology of the self in that it restructures social power relations by way of the images that it presents of the poetic speaker.

Considered “poetic clothing,” erotic verse can be seen as fulfilling various functions of fashion, another system of communication that reproduces, responds to, and revolutionizes cultural norms.³⁰ First, erotic verse, like skimpy clothing, operates through shock value: by scandalizing or tempting its reader, it effectively distinguishes its text, making it a novelty in the public eye. As a technology of the self for certain early female poets, erotic verse set an extreme fashion—or what sociologist Georg Simmel referred to as “distinction”—of modern womanhood in that it sought to transform prescribed gender roles, modeling sexual agency for women (189).³¹ As opposed to Simmelian “imitations,” distinctive expressions of sexual liberation in literature can be seen as a kind of Hegelian antithesis that will

ultimately result in more liberated experiences of womanhood by dialectically challenging conventional gender roles. Secondly, erotic verse by women upsets the trope of woman as fetish object. Endowed with both agency and sexuality, the poetic voices in these texts are often the practitioners of the gaze, describing in erotic detail the bodies of their (generally male) lovers and their sexual experiences.³² Such erotic representations act as a powerful way of undermining absolute masculine control and promoting more autonomous roles for women.

In the Nicaraguan little magazine, Centro, Olga Solari described not only her lover's body, but her own, in "Mi azucena negra," a poem whose title, as Arellano points out, refers to the black female speaker's genitalia (Nicaraguan literary historian Eddy Kühl writes that Solari was "morena y de cabello crespo, que recordaba su ascendencia africana" [n.p.]).³³ This poem lyrically recounts a sexual encounter between the black speaker and her lover:

Hombre en tu montaña, hombre en la llanura,
llega el tiempo rojo y córtale los ojos.
Ven, canción nocturna, mécele sus labios.
Hazle un vestido con mi cuerpo negro. (30-34)

At the center of the poem, the inverted repetition, "Mi azucena negra, tu flecha de plata, / tu flecha de plata, mi azucena negra" (28-9), plays on sexual and racial difference by describing her lover's member as white. Adding to the poem's implications of miscegenation, which would have been a racy theme in 1939, the flagrant eroticism of the poem also may have shocked many readers. In addition to

the phallic images of arrows and mountains on grass plains, the speaker refers to “mi pozo de leche cubriendo tus campos,” which ostensibly denotes her sex covering his. Since the speaker is on top, she is in a position of sexual dominance (19). These risks in poetic content are likely what led Kühl to state:

A mi parecer, Olga Solari, en la década de 1930, fue la primera autora nicaragüense que escribió como mujer y para levantar la imagen independiente de la mujer, así como lo hizo Edna Saint Vincent Millay (1892-1950) en Nueva York a finales de la década de 1910, y Claudia Lars (1899-1974) en la década de 1920 en El Salvador.³⁴ (n.p.; my emphasis)

Kühl’s description of Solari as “independent” likely refers to Solari’s depicting her female speaker as a sexual agent: positioned above her white, male lover, this speaker inverts traditional dichotomies of gender and race.³⁵ Although whether or not Solari was the first Nica female poet to forge an image of the independent woman is debatable, she doubtlessly goes farther than other Nica female poets in casting images of sexual liberation.

Solari was not the only female poet in Central America to play on racial mestizaje, a theme whose importance to isthmanian culture in general and women’s poetry in particular will be explored in chapter 4. Costa Rican poet, Fresia Brenes Hilarova, for example, advocates mestizaje in “Raza nueva,” an erotic sonnet published in Repertorio americano in 1939:

Tú la raíz y yo la flor!

Toma con cuidado mi amor
 con delicadeza infinita
 hiergue el talle de la vida!
 Abre los pétalos con luz de luna,
 soy flor como no hay ninguna!
 Tócame con tocar de espuma,
 báñame con mar de ternura.
 Riega eternidad en un instante.
 Ve una bella raza, nueva y pura,
 que con ansia palpitante,
 espera el fruto de nuestro amor!

Here Brenes, like Solari, uses thinly-veiled botanical metaphors (flor, raíz, fruta) to talk about sexual union. The “bella raza, nueva y pura” that may result from the lovers’ encounter suggests that the speaker and her partner are of different races (10). The speaker imagines herself engendering the utopian vision of mestizaje, Vasconcelos’s “cosmic race” that progressive intellectuals dreamed would establish a more autochthonous and innovative Latin America. These poems of Brenes and Solari thus carry political connotations that not only place them in dialogue with other Central American intellectuals of the 1930s (as we shall see in chapter 4, mestizaje was an important discourse in Central America at this time), but also demonstrates their imagining active roles for women as producers (and, literally, reproducers) of more equitable Latin American race relations. Even though the role

of reproducer is considered a traditional role that has historically repressed women, the speakers Brenes and Solari actively decide to use their bodies in this way. The sexual agency they express further emphasizes their self-conceptualization as the avant-garde of a new, more vital Central America.

Although not to highlight racial difference, Olga Violeta Luna (Guatemala) also employs botanical imagery to characterize the body of her sexual partner and addressee: “Quisiera morder tu piel / de melocotón maduro; / quisiera sorber la miel / de tu boca florida” (“Deseo” 1-4). Here the juicy desire of the speaker is directed towards an ungendered “tú”: coded with fruit and flowers, which conventionally signifies female genitalia in art, this “tú” could also be female, thus opening the poem to a possible lesbian interpretation. Instead of playing on racial and gender differences, multiple possible interpretations allow Luna to exploit racial and gender similarities to shock her readers and imagine more liberated roles for women.

Nicaraguan María Teresa Sánchez does not euphemize sexual experience in her “Éxtasis”; she does, however, employ a suggestive silence that underscores the eroticism of her poem. Here the poet, who may have been only fifteen years old when she published “Éxtasis” as part of Sombras (1939), resorts to ellipsis either in modesty or mystery:

A tu cuerpo amoroso entregué el mío,
junto a tus brazos fuertes que me estrechan,
arde un fuego que mi pasión accede,
a la dulce voz de tus ... y tu mirada clara;

fuego que rasga todos los días
 mi carne en el silencio de la noche,
 nutrida en la caricia de tus ríos.
 Náufraga de esa pasión y mi desvío,
 a tu cuerpo amoroso entregué el mío.³⁶

What goes unnamed in the ellipsis in the fourth verse (“tus ...”) could be revealed in the seventh as “tus ríos,” which acts as a metaphor for the lover’s semen. Despite giving herself over to her lover and describing her lover as “tearing open” (“rasga,” 5) her flesh, the speaker endows herself with agency: she is the one who actively gives herself to her lover with the verb, “entregué” (1, 9). It is also she whose passion “accede” (3), or brings about, her lover’s fuego, a flame that, by tearing her open, can also be interpreted as an erection. Indeed, the speaker revels in her passion; her sexuality brings with it a welcome abandon, described as “shipwrecked,” that, to the contrary of rendering her weak or passive, affirms her ownership of her body and her ability to surrender herself to its pleasure.

Giving an entirely different account of sexual liberation is the poetic speaker of Honduran Alma Fiori (a.k.a. Victoria Bertrand) in Nómada (1936).³⁷ Read straight through, this collection recounts the love life of the young female speaker, who falls in love twice. Her first boyfriend ultimately chooses a more experienced woman over her because she will not have sexual relations until marriage (“Así es”); her second boyfriend is a poet who has had many women. The speaker loves him crazily, implying in the poems “Audaz” and “Mimi Blulette” that not only did she

give him her virginity, but also (in “Loca”) her dignity and reputation and (in “Vencida”) her sense of self. In the poems “Por amor” and “Loca,” which appear together in the middle of the collection, the speaker describes feeling alone and humiliated: an alienation and shame that suggests that she has become pregnant with his child. In the later poem, “Dos,” she reflects on her two boyfriends from her cell in a convent, corroborating the interpretation that she is pregnant and has gone away to have the child. While she is away, she learns that her latest boyfriend has abandoned his poetry, and she believes it is for a wealthier woman (“Burgués”). She comes to find out, however, that his new wife is actually quite dull: “ni muy burguesa, / ni chic, ni sutil, ni fea, sin color / de nada—una entre mil” (“Compasión” 9-11). With this fact in mind, she forgives him, also because she learns that, by marrying, he has effectively defended her reputation in her absence:

...el único que salió a mi defensa
 fuiste tú, con tu misma gallardía de antaño.
 para siempre borraste, con un gesto galante,
 el enorme paréntesis que encerraba mi viaje. (“Del ayer” 7-10)

Instead of appearing as though she had left to have a baby, public speculation has filled in the “parenthesis” of her trip with the story of a jilted lover.

This collection is significant in that it portrays a naïve girl’s sexual coming of age. Although the speaker was “punished” at the end by being sent away to a convent without her boyfriend, she makes no apologies for where she is or what led her there. Although she does not reject this punishment, which would have been a

more powerful denouncement of unjust gender norms, the insight with which she recounts her past implies that she will build upon the growth from this experience by taking on a more independent life. She even comes to peace with herself in the last poem, “La dedicatoria,” where she dedicates the book to the boyfriend as her “último adios” (5). In this final poem, she also embraces the notion of herself as a nomad, characterized throughout the collection (and especially in the next-to-last poem, “Enigmática”) as a complex, indefinable and poetic person:

Novia extraña,
a veces fuerte, mujer audaz,
a ratos débil, cual niña huraña,
distinta siempre de las demás (“Enigmática” 1-4).

Significantly, towards the end of the collection, Fiori’s speaker begins to identify with nomadic birds, particularly a peregrina (“Única” 12) and an ave inquieta (“Burgués” 3). These birds occur in contrast to the Becquerian golondrina, reminiscent of a poetisa rhetoric and which always return to the safety of their nests, which appear in several earlier poems (“Nostalgia”, “Así es”). Indeed, in “Cruel,” the speaker announces that, as an “artista hasta el fin, nómada verdadera,/[...]no le enviaré un recuerdo ni volveré jamás” (58).

Fiori’s speaker abandons not only the poetisa aesthetic associated with Bécquer, but also the reductive, monofaceted image of femininity fashioned by the modernistas. She cites this version of womanhood in “Nostalgia,” when she alludes to Darío’s “Sonata” with the sad “Princesa de marfil y de rosa,” who passively

awaits her prince (7). Princes and princesses make various appearances in Nómada, especially in “Decepcionado,” when the first boyfriend is no longer her Prince Charming, and “Serenata,” when the new boyfriend seems to be Prince Charming but might be “un Príncipe Hechicero o un Poeta” (8). Tellingly, in “A una estrella,” the princess dies off and becomes a star in an allegory of the speaker’s life when her Prince Charming leaves her pregnant after she has given him her virginity. A princess no longer, the speaker now has a more fully developed subjectivity and can survive on her own away from home. She is no longer reduced to the hyper-idealized, overly sentimental image ascribed to women by the modernistas and Romantics or to the irresponsible, oversexed image of the flapper. The speaker recognizes both modes of being and incorporates them into her process of maturation and development of her complex selfhood.

Another dimension to Fiori’s modern woman poetics is the way in which she provides a setting for her young speaker to come of age. In the place of the speakeasies that North American flappers frequented, this Central American refers to the Club, the scene where she falls in love her second beau (“Otoño en primavera”). In the second, third and fourth poems of the collection, the speaker describes a more formal affair, such as a ball, where her first beau and she waltz together (“El primer vals”), enjoy a glass of champagne (“La copa”), and leave together (“Al salir de un baile”). The change in settings of these two romances also suggest a change from old-fashioned femininity, which included guarding one’s purity, to Modern womanhood, where women and men could enjoy a nightlife not bound by formal

rules of etiquette and cotillion dance. It is in this context that Fiori includes the poem, “Mimí Blulette,” which relates a scene of

placer...música...armonía...

y el vertigo de París.

[...]

Poesía...amor...ilusión...

Con azul delectación

se embriagó todo mi ser

de aquel vértigo lejano. (2-3, 9-12)

This poem may seem to depict only an impression of falling in love or enjoying the nightlife, but its title and theme are rooted in the popular novel, Mimi Blulette (1916), by Italian Guido da Verona. Once a bestseller and translated into nine languages, the novel has not since received any critical attention, although it does appear twice in Honduran poetry written by women in the 1930s, who likely read the Spanish translation published in Madrid in 1922. Like Fiori, Suárez dedicates a sonnet, also titled “Mimí Blulette,” to the heroine:

Danzaba locamente, y al danzar parecía

que una pena enorme su alma torturaba.

Su locura era de esas que nadie comprendía

porque reía para otros y para sí lloraba.

Su alma, lirio blanco, despertó una noche

cuando el champagne cantaba y el fru fru
 de las sedas simulaba un derroche
 de besos encendidos con notas del My Blu.

Un desconocido, con ojos de tristeza
 se acercó ante ella. Tembloroso e incierto
 le empezó a hablar de amor. Bajo la tibieza

de noches estrelladas se fueron adorando...
 Un día el amante voló hacia el desierto
 y Mimi, muy triste, se quedó danzando.

Clearly, the story of Mimi impacted these two female poets from Honduras, and we can extrapolate that the novel made a similar impression on other Hondurans, if not Central Americans at large. For this reason, I find it of value to remember this heroine, within whose life the themes of sexuality, fashion, poetry, traveling and dancing converge, and to comment on her significance to these poets as a model of modern European womanhood.

Modeled perhaps on a Gibson Girl or cabaret star, at a young age Mimi moved from rural Italy to Paris, where she became a rich and famous call girl and dancer.³⁸ Always the whore with the heart of gold, Mimi wins over both the reader and the sympathetic narrator, who repeatedly compares her dancing to poetry (6, 27, 43, 58, 96, 105, 107, 266). Mimi takes Paris—described by the narrator as both

“vortex” and “drunken city,” replete with taxies, trucks and lots of ads (13)—by storm, and in the birthplace of fashion, she becomes fashion, itself:

There were others perhaps more beautiful, more intelligent than Blulette, but Blulette was the fashion, and the fashion is a glory that cannot be examined by the light of criticism. The fashion is that real power decreed by crowds, by a casual plebiscite, a sort of collective curiosity that sometimes, from nothing, causes genius to arise. The fashion is the fortuitous chance that governs thought, art, beauty, life in fact. That which is great has not always been the fashion, but a certain greatness has always shown round and enveloped the caprices of this universal deity. (42-3)

Not only does she influence dress and hairstyle, but also music and the latest dance craze. After a number of meaningless love affairs and abortions, Mimi falls in love with the mysterious Laire, and “from the great noisy City, scene of her glory, the name of Mimi Blulette vanished...the inimitable dancer was no more seen” (117).

When Laire vanishes one day, a devastated Mimi goes after him, becoming the ultimate nomad (an identity that would resonate in Fiori’s poetry). Narrated with the most flagrant Orientalism, Mimi’s journey leads her to Algeria, where she finds that Laire has been killed in battle only the day before her arrival. Mimi returns to Paris and produces the Sun Dance, inspired by her travels through the Sahara, in which she dances nude amidst a real bonfire on stage. After receiving rave reviews on her opening night, Mimi dresses herself carefully and brushes her long hair before

drinking twelve vials of morphine and meeting her lover in death. By taking her own life at the end of the novel, Mimi engages in one last scandalous behavior, underscoring again her independent will.

Replete with soft porn and the cosmopolitanism of Paris, Mimi Blulette offers a modern, sexual heroine who, like Dorita and some Central American female poets, is also a traveling dancer/poet. On the Modern woman and dancing, Dumenil writes, “A final indication of youthful insistence upon sexuality was the new dancing. [...] their dancing was symbolic, another badge of their rejection of traditional standards of behavior” (135). Whether with dance or erotic poetry, these women fuse their art with their lives through exuberantly liberating motifs of sexuality and personal agency, enacting what Bourdieu has called the arte de vivre. Through their extreme styles, behavior, and art, these women set the fashion of modernity for other women. Like Mimi, who exemplifies independence and modern womanhood by dancing, traveling, having sex and abortions, and committing suicide, the poets of this chapter privilege sexuality as a symbol of their modernity because it signifies their control over their own bodies and life choices.

Perhaps no other female poet in Central America capitalized on eroticism to the extent of Honduran poet Clementina Suárez. Indeed, Suárez and eroticism seem to have been inextricably linked from the poet’s 1931 recital in Tegucigalpa’s National Theatre in the nude.³⁹ The introduction to Los templos de fuego (1931) corroborates her challenging of social norms. Here Hernán Robleto writes that this collection is characterized “por una audacia que podría ser considerada... como una

perversidad” (1). Suárez does not write in euphemisms; indeed, she thumbs her nose at such conventions, testing the limits of language and social mores. It is likely this quality that prompts Carrera to comment that Suárez writes with “una cierta índole de virginidad selvática,” although there is nothing that suggests virginity in Suárez’s verse (273). In her biography of Suárez, Gold testifies to the scandal with which De mis sábados el último (1931) and Suárez’s other erotic pieces were met.⁴⁰ She writes about meeting a woman who had read the book as a teenager, hiding it “under her pillow because her mother had forbidden her to read such trash by that whore who had called herself a poet” (91). As we shall see in the readings to follow, Suárez’s poetic libido is untamed, even in her earliest collections. In “Sexo” (Los templos de fuego), for example, Suárez explicitly addresses the female genitalia as “tú,” endowing it with movement and activity: “Ánfora llena / de sensaciones y vibraciones, // arpa que vibra / que llora y gime / voluptuosidades” (1-10). Despite her sex’s agency, however, the speaker highlights damage done to it in order to characterize sexual difference: “Desgarrado fuiste / por su loca furia / en aquella tarde // [...] // Pero yo te bendigo / gruta maravillosa / porque la vida me diste // y porque en esa flor estropeada / una nueva vida / yo también di...” (14-16, 23-25). Whereas a male lover tore it in passionate rage, a later tear resulted from giving birth, a powerful (if traditional) feminine act.

De mis sábados el último is a collection of poetic prose pieces that can be read together as a stream-of-conscious diary of sorts. The first piece, from which the collection takes its title, features a speaker who waits for her lover every Saturday.

When one Saturday he does not arrive and comes instead on Sunday to explain that he needed to be with his family, she is angry and bitter, explaining that this Saturday was the last one she would ever wait for him. Lovers and sexual encounters weave in and out of this collection, which ends with the emphatic poem, “Boca.” Here the speaker demands that her “Amado” kiss her: “Bésame, boca perversa, boca endiablada, que cuando tú me besas quisiera que cada molécula mía se convirtiera en boca para gritarte loca y perdidamente: ¡Bésame!” (8-12). In all the prose poems of the collection, the speaker affects an angry, empowered subjectivity that is reiterated in Los templos de fuego. In that collection’s “Serpiente,” for example, she becomes the snake her lover tells her she is: “agilísima, maravillosa y divina, sutilmente, me arrastré hasta él... y clavé mis dientes y derramé en su carne desgarrada, mi pomo de terror...” (8-11). As terrifically powerful as she is, however, she reserves the deadliest poison for her male addressee, whom she characterizes as the worst of the worst: “Pero en aquel corazón empedernido no había veneno que hiciera efecto, él tenía un tóxico mucho más poderoso, en su corazón, como en un vaso de agua, estaba encerrada toda la maldad del mundo, y tenía la fuerza de todos los venenos” (11-17). In similar ways, Suárez repeatedly privileges her female speakers over their male lovers. For Suárez, women are wise, sexy, and dominant, basking in a sexual power differential stacked in their favor. By repeatedly endowing her sexualized version of femininity with agency and control, Suárez envisions a new kind of womanhood for her readers, both male and female alike. This modern womanhood,

now a part of literary and cultural discourse, will go on to set the fashion for subsequent expressions of the Central American modern woman.

In contrast to the prose poems of De mis sábados, Los templos de fuego is dominated by free verse but includes several experimental sonnets. In one of these, entitled “Hombre Montaña” [sic], the speaker declares her/his passion for the “cuerpo moreno” of her/his lover, which opens this poem to the theme of racial miscegenation, as in Solari and Brenes de Hilarova (1). Formally, the two quartets of this “sonnet” consist of verses of fifteen syllables each (as if the traditional fourteen syllable line cannot contain the speaker’s passion), while the three couplets (instead of two tercets) exhibit the following meters: twelve and fourteen syllables, fifteen and fifteen syllables, and fourteen and fourteen syllables. Although the speaker is not grammatically gendered, we surmise that she is feminine in keeping with the heterosexual prowess of her lover, who is able to “capturar las amadas” (4). Insofar as her race is not mentioned, its invisibility in the poem suggest that the speaker’s race is hegemonic, or whiter than that of her lover. Using equine metaphors, she describes her lover as an “árabe indómito en su veloz corcel” (3): a very stereotypical metaphor for an African male. The speaker thus inscribes her racialized (even racist) desire through erotic language based on sexual and racial difference. For example, she contrasts her lover’s hyper-masculine body to her own: “Él, que es todo rudeza, sabe amar con ternura; / la carne femenina le ofrenda su dulzura” (5-6). He is rugged, active; she is delicate, passive. The speaker and her lover are characterized through binary adjectives stereotypical of the different sexes

and races. In this way, she can be seen as asserting a feminist (or liberated woman's) independence, but it can also be argued that she is as perpetuating racial stereotypes in order to underline the shock value of her speaker's unconventional sexual activity.⁴¹

In disparity with the other poems in the collection and in Suárez's oeuvre, "Hombre Montaña" does not function as a feminist manifesto. Although the erotic theme may imply a liberated female speaker in 1931, the poem closes in the traditional alejandrino meter with a final reinforcement of very traditional gender roles: "Es el Hombre Montaña, con su mirar risueño, / y es el hombre que amo, mi señor y mi dueño" (13-14). The patriarchal control to which the speaker submits in the final verse paints a very different picture of femininity from those rendered in the rest of the collection and in De mis sábados el último. It could be significant, then, that the speaker does not explicitly identify her gender in this poem, as if she does not want to attribute this self-deprecating desire to her sexual difference. The very traditional gender roles presented in this poem (and in others, such as "Yo fui Leda" and "Muñequita") reveal an apparent passion of Suárez for constantly reinventing herself through her poetry, wherein each poem allows her to express a certain aspect of herself in a unit, one of many subjectivities. The fact that the submissive aspects in these poems do not correspond with the overt feminism makes space for her complexities and contradictions, allowing for the role of masochist alongside more assertive, at times sadist, selves. Suárez demonstrates that the modern woman can encompass both traditional and non-traditional gender roles.

These stereotypical elements of feminine sexuality in Suárez's verse can also be seen as enacting what early fashion theorist James Laver has called the "seductive principle," which suggests that women dress in order to make themselves more attractive to men (xii). Laver saw this seduction through clothing as a way for women to maintain social status (ergo, a kind of power) by attracting the most suitable man. In terms of "poetic clothing," the seductive principle in Suárez's poetry feeds into the many contradictions of sexuality and modern womanhood that she brings into play. It can also be seen, however, as acting as a strategic concession to prevailing power structures of race and gender. By submitting her poetic voice on occasion to racist phallocentrism, Suárez alleviates some of the threat that her more assertive poems might pose to conservative readers. In this way, she avoids alienating these readers and better positions herself for seducing them when playing more dominating roles, as in "El ruego."

The fact that the title of the poem, "Hombre Montaña," uses capital letters for both words suggests that this male lover is also a divinity, thereby lending it to dialogue with the poem "El ruego," which plays on traditional perceptions of gender and sexual difference to more liberating ends. In "El ruego," the female speaker prays to God that He will change her into someone else. She explains that "Yo no soy como la rama / de la encina, que siempre está tranquila" (1-2) and that she is tired of the mundane life of a woman (55). She would like to be Santa Teresa (10), Ida Rubinstein (14), Marie Curie (17), la Duce (v. 18), la amada del Poeta (19) and Princess María of Romania (21-2), or a campesina (23-7).⁴² Appealing to God's

paternalistic, or chivalric, side, the speaker plays on her position as a “little woman” in order to get what she wants:

Yo sé que eres cortés,
que atenderás al ruego y a las lágrimas
de una pobre mujer,
los hombres son muy cultos para ellas. (56-9)

Then the speaker takes her sexual difference from this masculine God to an outrageous extreme, offering divine sexual favors in exchange for God’s granting her wish:

Dios, Diosito, me tienes de rodillas,
mi cuerpo entre tus piernas,
mis manos en tus muslos
deslizando una caricia,
mi boca temblorosa con su ruego,
mis ojos en tus ojos. (60-5)

The submissive position of kneeling in prayer suddenly becomes subversive. Unlike the erotic poetry of mystics where passive, ecstatic bodies are possessed by God or the Holy Spirit, here the female speaker takes possession of the Almighty. By thus affirming her agency in her relationship with the divine, the speaker calls into question the authority of a masculine deity. Although patriarchy may still reign supreme (as evidenced by the fact that it is God who must grant the speaker her desire), the speaker proves that she can manipulate (and perhaps destabilize)

phallogocentric dominance. Moreover, it is significant that, although the speaker desires to broaden her experience, she does not desire to change her gender. In fact, she uses her erotic verse to re-imagine herself as a woman in a poetic technology of the self. The speaker not only thus privileges women's experiences, but she also highlights sexual difference as a positive venue for exploring one's subjectivities through a changed, more liberated role in society. Her erotic "poetic clothing" endows its wearers with agency, investing them with the tools necessary to recreate their own experiences as women in a modern world.

Suárez is not the only Central American female poet of this study who would fashion "poetic clothing" that would affirm and empower its wearers. As we have seen in this chapter, several female poets used erotic poetry to imagine new versions of female subjectivity. Easing the transition from poetisa verse to flagrant eroticism, Luna, Brenes, and Solari use botanical metaphors to code sexual experiences in their poetry. Brenes, Suárez, and Solari make a bold move by "grafting" poetic speakers and lovers of different races, signifying additional poetic projects of racial miscegenation. In Nicaragua, we saw how Sánchez behaved and dressed in modern woman fashion not only in real life, but also in her verse with more explicit imagery of heterosexual union and female climax. We also saw how Fiori's Nómada lyrically recounts a girl's sexual initiation and her subsequent transformation to adulthood. Humiliated and exiled after becoming pregnant, the speaker sidesteps categorization of her story as a mere cautionary tale by exploring the density with which this experience has impacted her character, thus developing a complex,

multidimensional vision of womanhood that reconciles sexual liberation and wisdom in the figure of a young woman. Finally, Suárez completes the spectrum of intensities and poetic projects that we find in erotic verse written by Central American women in the 1930s.

The female poets of this chapter are significant not only because of their contributions to a male-dominated literary canon, but also because they helped to consolidate the presence of the modern woman in Central America by providing Central American readers with local models of modern womanhood. Like Dorita, these poets circulated images of the modern woman that could be imitated to varying degrees by other Central American women. They thus fashioned a discourse of what it meant to be modern and female in this tropical region that has been historically overlooked for having cultural role models of its own. Unlike Dorita, however, these poets resisted becoming mere fetish objects, a condition that caused the figure of Dorita to undercut the image of modern womanhood that she allegedly represented. Solari, Brenes, Luna, Fiori, and Suárez manipulated their erotic “poetic clothing” through their speakers’ agency in order to displace the (male) gaze that would have otherwise objectified them. By stressing the agency of their poetic voices, they also underscored the shock value of erotic verse written by women, which contributed to their novelty in the literary market. Because they were daring enough to write erotic verse, they provided an extreme example of modern womanhood that could be emulated and appropriated to varying degrees. In this way, their erotic verse both acted as and engendered an empowering technology of the self that would continue

to shape women's roles in Central America throughout the twentieth century. Meanwhile, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, contemporary female poets would channel the agency and liberation implied by this erotic verse to fabricate and motivate changing roles for women and other subaltern subjects who had up until now not been allowed access to the Central American lettered city.

Notes

¹ While I was in Costa Rica in 2008, the film was still locked in the Variedades vault, and I had to obtain special permission from the Jinesta Urbini family to view it.

² The robotic Maria in the German film, Metropolis (1927), is an example of this last characterization.

³ Grieb stipulates that, despite its growing numbers, Guatemala's middle class remained without a voice in government, which left it frustrated, whereas Ubico led many indigenous populations to believe that they were participants in policymaking and that the dictator was genuinely interested in their welfare, which, Grieb writes, "was difficult for the upper and middle classes to comprehend" (35, 37).

⁴ El Salvador was the only Central American republic not under the UFC's direct hold because its Pacific location was not ideal to banana cultivation or shipping. Historian Peter Chapman writes, however, that "El Salvador did have an oligarchy, a very rich one, known as the 'Fourteen Families.' The 'Fourteen' shared United Fruit's worldview and ruled with the military, often corruptly. [...] El Salvador was like Nicaragua: a 'banana republic' that didn't have very many bananas" (123).

⁵ In Culturas híbridas, García Canclini analyzes Latin America's hybrid modernities, which he terms "heterogeneidad multitemporal," to describe the coexistence of the highly modernized places and places with little or no Western development (36).

⁶ For more on the gendered anxieties associated with modernity, see Felski's The Gender of Modernity.

⁷ Throughout the 1930s, Guatemala's daily, El Imparcial, ran a weekly column by New Yorker Mariana Mays Martin entitled, "La Mujer Moderna," which brought the North American experience of the modern woman to Guatemalan readership. This label would be echoed by editorialists and advertisers not only in El Imparcial, but also in Guatemalan womens' magazines of the 1930s, such as Nosotras, Azul and Alma América, the last of which was marketed throughout Central America.

⁸ Joanne Hershfield writes that in Mexico, the flapper was referred to as la flapperista or la flaperesca (58).

⁹ Freedman reacts against equating historians' tendency to equate 1920s feminism with sexual liberation, reminding readers that women's experiences in this decade were diverse and included struggles among lower-class women to balance home and work, as well as social reform movements led by women that were not glamorous but that did bring great change to U.S. society.

¹⁰ Although the phenomenon of the modern woman would have impacted rural and lower-class women to some degree, my research on women and the lettered city—which draws from national periodicals marketed to upper and middle-class women in Central American cities—limits me from drawing conclusions about the experiences of lower-class and rural women.

¹¹ Hollywood role models of modern femininity were not only imported for adult women, but also for young girls. In 1934, El Imparcial held a Shirley Temple contest that was entered by some 174 little girls from Guatemala's capital city.

Studio photographs of little girls dressed up as the child star appeared not only throughout the pages of El Imparcial for several weeks, but also Nosotras and de Wyld's poetry collection, Destellos del alma.

¹² Nicaraguan Joséfa de Toledo began lobbying for women's suffrage as early as 1918 with the regular publication of her Revista femenina ilustrada. In El Salvador, journalist and novelist Prudencia Ayala led the suffrage movement, declaring herself a candidate for the presidency in 1930 and going to jail on several occasions for her activism (Foster 202). In 1923, Costa Rican suffragettes formed the Liga Feminista in order to push for the vote. Despite these movements, Central American women did not widely enjoy the right to vote until the 1940s and 50s.

¹³ Alfonso H. Quetzales's Tipos y rincones de Xelajú (1938) lauds the city for its modern treasures in various poems about its streets and parks, as well as the Temple of Minerva, the arrival of the railroad and resorts in the region. The cover of the book features what appears to be an image of telegraph cables and a modern bridge stretched over cobblestone streets and crumbling colonial facades. In the collection's title, Quetzales poetically alludes to the city by its Quiché name, Xelajú. He also includes a number of poems with indigenist themes.

¹⁴ See Waleska Samayoa for a photographic guided tour of Guatemala's art deco.

¹⁵ See, for example, Gómez's Álbum de la nueva Honduras and Soto Hall's El "Libro azul" de Guatemala, both of which are big coffee-table books of high quality with thick, slick pages and color print.

¹⁶ The Guatemalan press promoted tourism within Guatemala to excess by featuring regular stories on and images of the country's beautiful and exotic destinations. The Ubico regime also effectively promoted a national tourist industry with his annual November ferias—meant to attract foreign investment—in which people from all over the country would convene in Guatemala City's grand exhibition halls (now home to the Museo Nacional de Arqueología, Historia y Etnografía and the Museo Nacional de Arte Moderno) to exhibit their region's artisanry and products. Tani Marilena Adams documents the use of studio photography's ethnographic portraits as another visual medium that was used to stimulate tourism under Estrada Cabrera and Ubico ("Una breve gira" 2).

¹⁷ Philosophical atomism, which dates back to the sixth century B.C. with Hindu philosopher, Kanada, would have likely been part of the theosophy movement, whose impact on Central American poetry in the 1930s will be discussed further in the next chapter.

¹⁸ Cinema was not seen as only a leisure activity, but was appreciated for its documentary and propagandist capacities. María Lourdes Cortés includes a list of filmic "shorts," or brief documentaries, made in Costa Rica as early as 1907 (343-44). Edgar Barillas documents Ubico's love for the camera as a mode of propaganda. Ubico had all matters of the Guatemalan state (which, in his totalitarian regime, included any public event) filmed and archived on hundreds of rolls throughout his presidency. Jeffrey Gould's film, 1932, Cicatriz de la memoria/Scars

of Memory, which contains archival footage of the 1932 peasant massacre in El Salvador, also testifies to the documentarian use of film in Central America during the 1930s.

¹⁹ For more on Latin American national cinemas, especially those of Argentina, Mexico and Brazil, see King.

²⁰ Trujillo, et. al., explain that, due to censorship or self-censorship under the Ubico regime, most news and social criticism were suppressed, resulting in an excess of superficial content (46). This context may explain the appearance of a national obsession for Hollywood, as Hollywood would have been a “safe” topic for scrutinized editors.

²¹ Cortés explains that, with El retorno, Costa Rican writers took a cue from current trends in literature by interlacing the plot with cuadros de costumbres, or scenes typical of the Costa Rican countryside (37). In this way, the film also fulfilled a nationalist role in that it provided spectators with what the newspaper La nueva prensa described as “un fiel reflejo de nuestra vida nacional” (in Cortés 43). The fact that many of the film’s characters were played by their real life counterparts from San José society added to its classification as nationalist realism.

²² The city is contrasted with scenes from the beautiful, peaceful countryside and productive coffee plantations. Out of sync with the positive images of Costa Rican life is the image of three poor children dressed in rags in the doorway of their shack. This shot is juxtaposed with an intertitle that cites a verse from Costa Rica’s national

anthem. I interpret this shot as an interjection of social consciousness on the part of the camera, which effectively contrasts the children's poverty with the wealth of the hacenderos. Social critiques such as these were common in the Repertorio americano, where San José writers and activists such as Carmen Lyra, Max Jiménez and Emilia Prieto routinely protested against economic injustice.

²³ Other aspects of El retorno make it interesting to film scholars and cultural scholars, alike. For example, in addition to its socially conscious camera that sympathizes with railroad workers, indigent children and coffee plantation peons, one scene features a uniformed black police officer—certainly rare at this time—who speaks in thick dialect. The film also contains auteur moments, including a surreal dream sequence, images of clouds (perhaps a citation of the Figueroa style of Mexican cinema), and a shot of a swinging clock pendulum juxtaposed with a swinging, high-heeled foot attached to a bare female leg, crossed at the knee.

²⁴ Throughout The Arcades Project, Benjamin demonstrates concern for what Marx has termed “commodity fetishism” and the impacts it would have not only in the commercial arcades, but on modern social life.

²⁵ The following poets were also teachers: María Loucel (El Salvador, 1899-1957), Mercedes de Muñoz Ciudad Real (1910-?), Emma Posada de Morán (El Salvador, 1912-1997), Mercedes Maití de Luarca (El Salvador, 1907-1974), Ámparo Casamalhuapa (El Salvador, 1910-1971), Dina Palacios Martínez (El Salvador), Mercedes Viaud Rochac (El Salvador), Maruja Luján Castro (Costa Rica, d. 1938),

Fresia Brenes de Hilarova (Costa Rica), Gris (Costa Rica), Ifigenia (Costa Rica), Emma Gamboa (Costa Rica, 1901-?), Dora Gotay (Costa Rica), Gertrudis Montalbán (Costa Rica), Magdalena Spínola (Guatemala, 1886-1991), Angelina Acuña (Guatemala, 1905-2006), Carmen de Mantilla (Nicaragua), Fausta Ferrera (Honduras, 1891-1971), Olimpia Varela y Varela (Honduras, 1899-1986), and Argentina Díaz Lozano (Honduras, 1912-?). These poets were also journalists: Lilián Serpas (El Salvador, 1905-1985), María de Baratta (El Salvador, 1890-1978), Fresia Brenes de Hilarova, Gris, Emma Gamboa, Dora Gotay, Amelia Ceide (Costa Rica), Magdalena Spínola, Angelina Acuña, Laura Rubio de Robles (Guatemala, 1886-1975), Romelia Alarcón de Folgar (Guatemala, 1900-1971), Annie Valladares Saenz (Guatemala), Annie Flefil (Guatemala), Luz Valle (Guatemala, 1896-1971), Margarita Leal y Rubio (a.k.a. Griselda Montes de Oca, Guatemala), Margarita de Azori (Guatemala), Malin de Echevers (Guatemala), Marta Josefina Herrera (Guatemala), Aura Rostand (Nicaragua, 1905-1959), and Paca Navas de Miralda (Honduras, 1900-1971). Other female poets may have also worked as teachers or journalists, but I lack the documentation to include them here.

²⁶ This list is compiled of poets with documented travel; probably other Central American poets also would have traveled extensively, but I lack the documentation to include them here.

²⁷ See Kunzle, Veblen, Marx, Flugel, Laver, Steele, Gamman and Makinen, Craik and Freud.

²⁸ Mulvey explains that narrative cinema excludes female spectators from the pleasures of looking (scopophilia) because the voyeuristic spectator, regardless of actual sex, is necessarily “masculinized” by the position implied in the “woman as image/man as bearer of the look” dichotomy (442-3).

²⁹ In film studies, suture refers to the technique of stitching the spectator into the filmic text in such a way that the spectator (con)fuses her identity with the focalizing subject in the film. Scopophilia, or the pleasure in viewing or voyeurizing what is on stage, is related to suture in that the latter constructs the spectator as the subject of the gaze. Mulvey argues that this fetishizing gaze is generally gendered male because cinema typically codes the object of desire film as female.

³⁰ Returning to the theme of fashion, it is irresistible to compare the topic of erotic poetry written by women to “where the garment gapes” in Barthes’s The Pleasure of the Text: “Is not the most erotic portion of a body where the garment gapes? [...] It is this flash itself which seduces, or rather: the staging of an appearance-as-disappearance” (9-10). Perhaps the erotic poem acts as such as “flash” in that it is but one short text in a poet’s oeuvre, an intermittent glimpse at the erotic aspect of a poetic subjectivity.

³¹ In 1904, Simmel theorized that the dynamics of fashion consisted of imitation and distinction, where those of the upper classes use fashion as a way to distinguish themselves from the lower classes, and those of the lower classes imitate the upper

classes in order to feel more distinguished. Fashion constantly changes because imitation quickly renders common what was once distinguishing.

³² Erotic verse written by women may not have been new to Central America in the 1930s. In 1896, Nicaraguan Clementina del Castillo published Las sensaciones, which was a bestseller and enjoyed four separate printings. In the long poem, a female poetic voice confides in a “querida amiga,” telling her in detail about losing her virginity on her wedding night. Despite Ramos’s arguments in that del Castillo was the pseudonym for a woman (“La mujer” n.pag.), I suspect that it was a man—probably well-known and not wanting to be associated with writing such smut—who wrote the poem; by choosing a female pseudonym, the female speaker was made more believable and the sexual details more tantalizingly taboo. I doubt that a woman would associate such pleasure with sexual initiation and her partner’s member, going so far as to write “cuán maravillosa, amiga, esa arma es” (122). Indeed, the poem seems more a male fantasy of the feminine perspective:

Temí morir herida por arma tan gigante
 Pero natura pródiga la virgen al formar,
 Le ha dado blandas fibras que abren al instante,
 Y dejan aquel monstruo tranquilo penetrar. (133-36)

Moreover, the tone of the poem is more tongue-in-cheek than sensuously erotic, suggesting that it was intended more for its X-rated comedy than for its poetic value.

For example, the poem ends with a play on oral sex: “Quisiera siempre viva sentirla en mi interior, / [...] / El labio sobre el labio, oh delirante amor!” (142, 144).

³³ Solari, who was born in Matagalpa in 1914, self-identified as a Nicaraguan poet, although she lived in exile Chile at the time of publication of “Mi azucena negra.” Ramos writes that, as the Solari family supported Sandino during early 1930s, Somoza “suggested” that they leave the country. They moved to Chile, where they were also “figuras destacadas” (“Re: Olga Solari”).

³⁴ As Lars did not first publish until 1934 and did not publish very original verse until 1937, I believe Kühl (a local historian who admits he is more interested in Solari as a daughter of Matagalpa than as a literary persona) is mistaken to attribute her coming of age to the 1920s.

³⁵ Kuhl writes that the landowning Solari family was Italian and came to Matagalpa by way of Chile in 1910. Olga’s mother’s family, the Mongríos, “tenían rasgos de complexion negroide” and were originally from the Dominican Republic, having emigrated to Nicaragua around 1900. Whereas Solari had a noticeably African phenotype, her sister, Malucha (a ballerina who frequently provided dance accompaniment for Olga’s poetry recitals), had a fairer complexion: “Malucha era de mayor estatura y de tipo latino, Olga era morena, de cabello crespo ensortijado y más robusta” (“Re: Olga Solari” n.pag.). Historian Carol A. Smith writes that such “colorismo”—or differing racial phenotypes within the same family—is common in Nicaragua: “‘el negro’ de una familia mestiza por lo general era tratado con cariño y

no con desprecio” (610). She concurs, however, that among the lower-class mestizo families in Nicaragua, lighter-skinned children, who are valued more positively, often receive better treatment than their darker-skinned siblings (611).

³⁶ Ramos writes that, although it had always been officially recorded that Sánchez was born in 1918, the poet declared in 1993 that she was really born in 1924, having added six years to her age as a young woman in order to obtain permission to open her Editorial Nuevos Horizontes (“La mujer” n.pag.).

³⁷ In that the figure of the nomad or pilgrim recurs throughout Central American poetry written by women, it must have resonated with them. In addition to Fiori’s title collection, nomads occur in Acuña’s “Ansiedad,” Del Pilar’s “El final del camino”, Luna’s “Misterio,” Suárez’s “Por los viejos caminos”, Lars’s “Porque soy vagabunda” and Rostand’s “Retrato mental.” I surmise that the nomad image encompassed not only the newfound mobility that these modern women were experiencing, but also the questions about which way(s) their new independence would take them in terms of gender roles, professional occupation and lyric expression. In 1934, El Imparcial ran a long piece, titled, “El nomadismo, signo de la época,” which reflected on how traveling and being constantly on the go were the activities that most represented modern youth around the globe and in Central America (Novas Calvo 3). Recently Braidotti has used the figure of the nomad to theorize a postmodern feminism that takes into account multiple positions and subjectivities.

³⁸ Hershfield writes of the turn-of-the-century Gibson Girl in Mexico: “Created by Charles Dana Gibson for the cover of Life Magazine, [she] dresses in a shirtwaist that falls to her ankles and boasts a small bustle; she wears her hair piled into a chignon that is topped by a jaunty hat; she is the epitome of a conventional yet at the same time modern femininity [...] not only fashionable, but also poised and confident” (57). Some of her renderings were slightly provocative and could be considered soft porn.

³⁹ Despite her narrative version of Suárez’s nude recital in “Clementina Suárez: Poetry and Womanhood,” Gold writes in Clementina Suárez: Her Life and Poetry that the poet insists she actually wore “a flesh-colored leotard under a flowing, gauzy robe, which may have given the impression of nudity” (84). Recently Suárez has been included in anthologies of erotic poetry (see Jiménez Faro and Abad), and criticism has also focused on eroticism in later poetry (see Aparicio).

⁴⁰ In 1931 Suárez published two collections, De mis sábados el último and Los templos de fuego, and was included in one anthology, Iniciales, in Mexico with Editorial Libros Mexicanos. These were each pocket-sized editions (measuring 3 ½ inches by 5 ½ inches), offering both affordability and portability, perhaps allowing them to reach more readers.

⁴¹ Gold writes in her biography that Suárez did not consider herself a feminist, “preferring to think of herself as a free woman and a realized woman” (80).

⁴² Perhaps the reference to la Duce refers to a feminine incarnation of Mussolini, still celebrated internationally in 1931 for his strong nationalist leadership. Following the Italian allusion before it, “la amada del Poeta” might refer to Dante’s lover (the “ritmo rutilante” [20] that she discovers in every voice is not only a Spanish phrase, but also an Italian one). Teresa must refer to Santa Teresa de Jesús (1515-82), the Spanish mystic who wrote treatises based on her visions and faith as well as poetry. Ida Rubenstein (1885-1960) was the Russian ballerina known for stripping completely nude as Salomé in the Dance of the Seven Veils in 1909. She also danced as the racy Scheherezade in the Russian Ballet’s One Thousand and One Nights in 1910, which may explain Suárez’s reference to the character in the poem “Explicaciones.” Perhaps due to her sensuality on stage, Rubenstein is also widely painted in nude portraits (One wonders if Rubenstein’s nude performances inspired Suárez to recite her poetry in the nude...). Marie Curie (1867-1934) was the Polish scientist who discovered chemical elements radium and polonium. A two-time Nobel Prize winner, she was the first woman to teach at the Sorbonne and scandalized Paris when she had an affair with a married man. Princess Marie of Romania (born Marie of Edinburgh, 1875-1938) was known for her unhappy in her marriage to King Ferdinand of Romania, her heroism during World War I, her lifelong friendship and correspondence with US dancer Lois Fuller, two memoirs, and her spiritual practice of the Bahá’í faith.

Chapter 3

Theosophy and Subversive Inscriptions

Identity becomes a special kind of problem in modernity. [...] The way in which we dress may assuage that fear by stabilizing our individual identity. It may bridge the loneliness of “mass man” by connecting us with our social group.

—Elizabeth Wilson, Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity (2003) 11-12.

In the preceding chapters, we have seen how Central America experienced a rapid modernization in the 1930s that led to social anxieties that were often gendered with respect to social changes. Writers across the globe have attempted to describe the anxiety associated with modernization in different contexts, along with its causes and effects, that accompanied the increased industrialization, globalization, and consumerism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This anxiety has often been described in terms of a loss of individual identity due to mass production and an increasingly mechanized culture. Walter Benjamin, for instance, famously lamented, “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is a symptomatic process whose significance extends beyond the realm of art” (“The Work” 221). Indeed, the withering of “aura” was felt by many as a spiritual crisis, observed by Georg Simmel as the reason for which many people turned to esoteric, superstitious and irrational spiritual practices, such as séances, in order to retreat from scientific positivism. In what he considered to be a

social movement, Simmel writes that, “many minds cannot free themselves from the past, [...] now that the advances of knowledge have destroyed the religious and philosophical superstition and the romantic sentiments which inspired past times” (293). More recently, Bruno Latour has theorized a hybrid modernity (bringing to mind García Canclini’s heterogenous multitemporalities), in which pre-modern spiritualism exists alongside the empiricism of modernity because of modern people’s need to cling to or reconstruct “aura.”

As can be seen in the epigraph above, fashion theorists have also observed changes in the modern person’s need to adorn him or herself and distinguish him or herself from the anonymity of mechanically-reproduced “mass man.” This need to re-establish individual identity was met in part by the spiritual practices of spiritism and theosophy that were in vogue in Europe and the Americas in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Theosophy continued to influence Latin American intellectuals, such as Gabriela Mistral and José Vasconcelos, as late as the 1930s. Popular the world over, theosophy featured the teachings of gurus Madame Helena Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Jiddu Krishnamurti and Katherine Tingley, leaders of the international Theosophical Society. Under their leadership, theosophy professed divine harmony and liberation attainable by studying the universal truths that can be found in the world’s religious writings. By rejecting religious dogmas in favor of a multi-disciplinary spirituality that included science, philosophy, art, esoteric religious practices, mythology, Rosicrucianism, mysticism, and occultism, theosophy acted as a precursor for today’s New Age movement. As a spiritual practice, it

embraced the increasingly global nature of the modern world. Although it capitalized on the exoticism of Eastern and indigenous spiritual beliefs, it also paved a route towards intercultural understanding and interfaith dialogue that not only valued non-Western ideals, but also respected non-Western peoples. Thus, theosophy had far-reaching effects in terms of public policies that impacted the treatment of colonized peoples, people of color, and women.

In their groundbreaking work on theosophy in Central America, intellectual historians Marta Elena Casaús Arzú and Teresa García Giráldez identify theosophy as the defining philosophical and nationalist movement in Central America during the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth.¹ Regarding the importance of theosophy in Latin America during the early twentieth century, cultural historians Eduardo Devés Valdés and Ricardo Melgar Bao write that, because theosophy is such a vast theme,

no podemos afirmar nada con seguridad pero sí, al menos, sugerir que no es posible entender la constitución de un universo ideológico y político, donde entra el radicalismo, el socialismo, sectores del nacionalismo y del latinoamericanismo, sin aludir a relaciones donde lo teosófico y lo masónico tienen un papel importante. (152)

Indeed, theosophy is difficult to portray because it can encompass any number of political, social, intellectual, and spiritual beliefs and practices. It is this multi-discursive nature that allows it to signify more than just spiritual ideals. In this way, theosophy can be seen as a strategic discourse for some Central American female

poets whose use of theosophical content in their poems is more than simply an expression of spiritual philosophy. In this chapter, we will see how theosophical discourse was used by Claudia Lars (El Salvador, 1899-1974) as a strategy of poetisa aesthetics to earn a place in the lettered city. We will also examine how Lars and Angelina Acuña (Guatemala, 1905-2006) used theosophy to conceal politically subversive subtexts. Before turning to these case studies, however, we will develop our discussion of the politics of theosophy in 1930s Central America through an analysis of La gringa, a 1935 novel by Guatemalan Carlos Wyld Ospina (1891-1956), which will further contextualize spirituality, politics, and gendered relations in Central America of the 1930s.

As indicated above, theosophy took on a particularly political character in Latin America, ideologically influencing the Mexican Revolution, Sandinismo, and Aprismo as it sought universal harmony among all races, cultures, and nations (Devés and Melgar 143). Describing Central American theosophy as “espiritualismo nacionalista,” Casaús writes that, in this region, theosophical practice was characterized by projects of racial equality, anti-imperialism, the moral and spiritual regeneration of the individual citizen, Central American Unionism, and an egalitarian society that valued the participation of Indians, mestizos, and women (“La creación” 74, 76). The “nationalist spiritualism” of the theosophy movement corresponds to what Ángel Rama calls “un pensamiento crítico opositor” that began to dominate the Latin America lettered city at the beginning of the twentieth century and constituted “una doctrina de regeneración social que habrá de ser idealista,

emocionalista y espiritualista” (128).² Indeed, the Central American movement was inspired heavily by the “nuestroamericanismo” promoted throughout Latin America by Darío, Martí, Rodó, Vasconcelos, Sandino, Haya de la Torre, and Mistral (Casaús and Giráldez 5, Devés and Melgar 138).

A philosophical response to nineteenth-century positivism and Catholicism, Central American theosophy also resonated with the European and Latin American intellectual movements of Krausism and modernism and incorporated the visits of European theosophists, such as Carlos Jinarajadasa, Annie Besant, and Krishnamurti, who traveled on the international lecture circuit (Casaús “La creación” 79-80). Because it is so readily associated with out-of-fashion modernismo and its values of “nuestroamericanismo” and spiritualist regeneration, theosophy is often overlooked as a philosophical movement that continued to enjoy considerable influence throughout Latin America in the 1920s, 30s, and 40s. In fact, periodicals throughout Latin America regularly published articles about theosophical figures and concepts during these decades. Devés and Melgar point out that, although theosophy began to lose steam in Europe and the United States in these later decades, the revolutionary nation-building in Latin America at this time had a galvanizing effect on the movement. Thus, theosophy was embraced in Central America—as in the rest of Latin America—by public figures such as Augusto César Sandino, Farabundo Martí, Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, Alberto Masferrer, Salarrué, Salvador Mendieta, Carlos Wyld Ospina, Joaquín García Monge, and Jorge Ubico (Casaús and Giráldez 5-6).³

In addition to carrying pacifist signification and meanings of female and indigenous political enfranchisement, in Central America—where, Casaús writes, “si bien no todos estuvieron abiertamente vinculados a la teosofía, la mayor parte de ellos participaron” (“La creación” 77)—theosophy carried with it certain region-specific ideals. These included not only anti-dictatorial and anti-imperialist sentiment, but also the nationalist renovations of the five individual Central American countries (“las patrias chicas”), as well as of the united regional “patria grande,” which called for a centralized Central American state (García “La patria grande” 133). García explains that the Unionist movement is often considered part and parcel of the region’s theosophy movement in that both shared followers and both called for tolerance, democracy, and the incorporation of marginalized groups into the citizenry in order to combat caudillismo, oligarchy, and dictatorship (“La patria grande” 124).

In Central America, theosophy also directly impacted the lives of women—particularly of the middle and upper classes—through the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral. Discussed in Chapter 1 as pivotal to “cultural feminism” (Shepherd’s term) and contributing to a gendered construction of literary taste, the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral was also a feminist group strongly linked to men’s groups that promoted theosophy and the defeat of dictatorships.⁴ In her article on the society in Guatemala, Casaús writes that the group was led by “mujeres ilustres, poetisas, escritoras y políticas” (35) and describes its markedly theosophist activities, which promoted higher education for women on an international level, conducted spiritist

séances, reading groups and classes ranging from hygiene to philosophical debates, conferences, concerts, art exhibits, tertulias, and poetry readings (“La influencia” 35-46). The theosophist influence on the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral lead Casaús to stress the importance of the society and theosophy on the isthmus:

Una gran parte de los literatos y poetisas de la década de 1920, vinculados al modernismo y que tuvieron una participación activa contra las dictaduras, a favor del centroamericanismo y de la incorporación de las mujeres y los indígenas a la ciudadanía, estaban imbuidos por este pensamiento pacifista, orientalista y espiritualista.
(45)

These theosophist values, as practiced by the poetisa leaders of the Guatemalan Sociedad and expressed in many poetisas’ writings, denoted an anti-dictatorial philosophy expressed in spiritual language and activities.

In accordance with Casaús’s scholarship on the society in Guatemala, literary historian Rafael Lara-Martínez writes that the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral was also present in El Salvador, where, in promoting the feminist values of theosophy and the unionist, regenerationist teachings of Masferrer, it contributed to the struggle for women’s suffrage (“En las manos” 11). He writes, “Demasiado influida por corrientes europeas y estadounidenses, la historiografía centroamericana no ha valorado aún la importancia de la teosofía y de la espiritualidad en el auge del feminismo en la región” (11). Indeed, it is theosophy that allows poets like Lars and Acuña not only to express feminist desires, but also to make political criticisms,

thereby subverting the traditional patriarchy of Western religious and political traditions and making space for the participation of women.

Just as the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral represents a form of cultural feminism, its theosophical practices can be understood as a form of what Rita Felski has termed “oppositional feminine culture,” or elements of women’s popular culture—such as fashion, sentimentalism, and mass production—that underscore certain gendered stereotypes (such as passivity, imitation, and emotionality) while also subverting the patriarchal underpinnings of hegemonic culture by co-opting religious and aesthetic authority (142). Felski asserts that spiritualism “became a highly feminized movement” (134). She explains that, not only did it reinforce “the purported attributes of femininity—impressionability, sensitivity, passivity—[as] the ideal qualities of a medium,” but it also offered women “a form of religious experience free of male mediation [and] an outlet for many women’s dissatisfaction with established religions” (134). Spiritualism not only valued conventional constructs of femininity, but also provided women with possibilities for a non-phallogentric religious experience that empowered them as leaders. Accordingly, Felski writes that these spiritual movements bespeak women’s dissatisfaction with present reality in that they seek to transcend mundane, domestic experience and a “mechanistic and rationalistic world-view” (131-2). Mystic trance allowed women the opportunity to explore new worlds and to challenge gender norms. Through theosophy, women could fashion an identity that not only countered the anonymity of modernity, but also the patriarchal society that continued to restrict women to the domestic sphere.

In that it encompassed so much more than just spiritual beliefs, theosophical discourse could be used in literary texts to imply multiple meanings, especially political criticisms that could not be stated more explicitly under oppressive dictatorial regimes. Viewed this way, theosophy bears some commonalities with fashion in that both can be seen as what I call multi-discourses, or those discourses that are so intertwined with other discourses as to blend and compound meanings, disrupting fixed semiotic relations. It is perhaps this shared multivalency that makes both theosophy and fashion two attractive modes through which modern writers, especially women, try to assemble and express individuality and restore “aura” to modernity’s mechanical reality. Weaving itself into society, theosophical discourse derives its meaning(s) and indications of power at any given juncture from its place in a chain of social signifiers. As a multi-discourse, theosophy acts as a particularly compelling kind of oppositional feminine culture because it can be used to signify many things—even contradictory ideas—at once. As a literary form, poetry provides unique opportunities for semantic plays, thus increasing the signifying potential of theosophy as a multi-discourse. In this way, poetry serves as a compelling genre for the expression of theosophist ideas. In a 1930 article in Repertorio americano, Costa Rican philosopher Roberto Brenes Mesén wrote in defense of a young Tico poet whose work had been degraded by a public official due to its “servicio de ideales teosóficos” (181). He goes on to encourage all young poets of Central America to foster theosophical ideals in their poetry: “Jóvenes poetas de esa tierra, traten de que no se extinga la llama de ese amor de ideal que os iluminó al partir” (181). Given

the poetic appeal of theosophy, it is not surprising that Devés and Melgar write that Latin American theosophist intellectuals included “poetas primero, educadores y pensadores después, políticos incluso” (137). Female poets also participated in this trend. They gendered the multi-discourses of theosophy and poetry, inflecting them with conventional perceptions of “feminine” spiritual and aesthetic attributes that acted as accomplices in veiling the counter-hegemonic significance of theosophy in the forms of feminism, anti-dictatorship, Unionism, racial equality, etc.

In poetry written by Central American women of this time period, theosophy has a tremendous presence and resonates with gendered perceptions of women’s and poetry’s elevated capacities for expressing spirituality. In Honduras, for example, literary historian Adaluz Pineda tells us that poet Ángela Ochoa Velásquez (1886-1969) was known for her “espíritu religioso y su adhesión al bien, cuya comprensión buscaba en la Biblia, en los viejos cantos del Rig Veda, en el Bagavad Gita, en el Zend Avesta, en el Corán, en los santos, en los poetas, en todas las sendas místicas” (95). Like many other contemporary Honduran poets, such as Clementina Suárez (1902-1991) in “Compréndeme,” she uses the theosophist imagery of the cosmos, atoms and stars to describe divine love in the 1934 poem, “Amor cósmico.” Another Honduran poet, Victoria Bertrand (under the pseudonym Alma Fiori; 1907-1952) also betrays a theosophist influence with her 1935 poem, “Krishnamurti.” Nicaraguan poet Aura Rostand (poetic pseudonym for María de la Selva; 1905-1959), whose mystic verses to the Virgin appear conventionally Catholic, suggests a theosophical influence in her “Retrato mental,” in which she writes at age twenty-

two that her favorite pastime is “la lectura y la meditación” (7-3), that her philosophy on misery is “ser consciente” (11-12) and that her favorite writer is the Renaissance Catholic mystic, Kempis (15-16). Costa Rican poet Fresia Brenes Hilarova, daughter of theosophist writer Roberto Brenes Mesén, exhibits an erotic version of theosophy in her poems, “Misticismo” and “Todo ser, expresión divina.” In the poems “Raza nueva”, “Plegaria de mujer,” and “Aguas en mi crystal,” theosophy, racial harmony, and Central American Unionism are conflated in erotic unions that celebrate feminine sexuality. Guatemalan poet Magdalena Spínola (1886-1975) was described by her biographer as “supersticiosa y se complacía en buscar explicaciones parapsicológicas y esotéricas para entender con ellas el mundo material e inmaterial” (Aguilar 71). Another Guatemalan poet, María del Pilar, describes the spiritualist activity of Tarot in her poem, “Cartomancia,” and her compatriot, Olivia de Wyld includes theosophical references in Arrullos with her “Páginas místicas” (62-90) which include the Indian legend, “El Príncipe de Capilavastu” (62-72) and the mystical testimony of reincarnation in “Un testimonio del Más Allá” (87-89). In Arrullos de Wyld also includes an image indicative of the Rosy Cross movement, an esoteric form of Christianity that seeks divine wisdom in symbolism, which was commonly linked to theosophy in Central America, that also includes a goddess and a pentagram, which was a symbol of the divine feminine (69).⁵

As a literary genre, narrative, like poetry, provides unique opportunities for theosophy to act as a multi-discourse, in that theosophy can play off the other discourses (Bakhtin’s heteroglossia) in the novel. Moreover, by looking at

theosophy in Wyld Ospina's narrative, La gringa, we can attain both a cultural context and a non-poetic counterpoint of theosophical and gendered discourse against which to read theosophical poetry written by Central American women of the same decade. La gringa also illustrates how new scholarship in Central American theosophy can enable new, politically subversive readings of literary texts once held in low esteem for merely upholding the hegemonic values of the oligarchy and dictatorships.⁶ Moreover, and pertinent to my larger project, La gringa also offers a gendered discourse on writing and the role of the modern woman, which contradicts theosophy's ideals of gender equality.

La gringa, which consists of three parts, chronicles the love of newspaperman Eduardo Barcos for Magdalena Peña, a beautiful criolla who manages her own plantation as if she were a man.⁷ In the second, retrospective part of the novel, we find out that Eduardo was a revolutionary against Guatemalan dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera, who ruled the country from 1898-1920. It was during this time that Eduardo initially fell in love with Magda, but Magda did not want to accompany him when he had to leave the country. As an exile, Eduardo earns a living by giving conferences on occultism and spiritism, two key components to the international theosophical movement (219). Through the political and spiritual activities of its male protagonist, La gringa represents the intellectual class not only of Guatemala during the 1930s, but also of Central America at large. Eduardo's espousal of these values, in addition to his sexist treatment of Magda, captures what theorist Raymond Williams has called a "structure of feeling" of the moment: the narrative betrays the

frustration of the male Central American intellectual at this time due both to unrelenting modernization and the persistence of traditional mores that contradicted the progressive egalitarian values of theosophy. Accordingly, *La gringa* sets the stage for this chapter's discussion of theosophy in poetry written by women and how the egalitarian nature of the philosophy opened a space—albeit restricted—for them to participate in the Central American lettered city.

At the beginning of the novel's first part, which takes place in the “present” moment, around 1935, Eduardo accompanies Mr. Benton to Magda's coffee plantation, and his love for Magda is reawakened after more than ten years of separation. Throughout the novel, Eduardo is attracted to Magda's beauty and intelligence, yet threatened by her independence and strength. On several occasions, he lectures her on how she should be more “feminine” and move with him to the city, a civilized place more fitting for a lady. In the third part, the romance continues over tiresome philosophical and theosophical discussions until the denouement, when an emancipated Magda decides once again to forego her relationship with Eduardo in order to travel alone through Europe.

Eduardo's journalistic career indicates that he is a fictional member of the Guatemalan and Central American lettered city of the 1930s. In *The Lettered City*, Ángel Rama writes that in Latin America at the turn of the twentieth century, the literary market consisted primarily of politicians and newspaper editors (123). Both the author's and his male protagonist's literary careers follow this trend, in that their journalism goes hand in hand with their literary and political activities. Like Wyld,

the fictitious Eduardo is the editor of a daily newspaper that has been involved not only in the revolution against Estrada Cabrera, but also in Unionist and theosophical circles throughout the 1920s. When he becomes a washed-out journalist under the regime of Jorge Ubico (Guatemalan dictator, 1931-44), Eduardo no longer participates in formal intellectual organizations but continues to philosophize in his op-ed column and with Magda, whose “silencio vale más que todas nuestras palabras. Sabe escuchar” (168). The almost total exclusion of women from this fictional lettered city—their only role is providing men with a mute audience—combined with the theosophical discourse in the narrative, paints a fictional but accurate scene of Guatemalan intellectual life in the 1930s.

The misogynist ambivalence of La gringa with respect to new roles for woman illustrates that society continued to struggle in the 1930s with social changes in Central America. For example, Magda is the only woman in La gringa whose character is developed. She is also the only woman permitted to attend Eduardo’s tertulias and the only woman honored by Eduardo’s philosophical monologues. In spite of the apparent esteem that Eduardo has for Magda’s intellect and strength, however, Eduardo is always trying to persuade Magda to behave more like a lady of her social status. The topic of Magda’s femininity is one of Eduardo’s obsessions: “si no te conviertes en un marimacho te desintegras en una puta” (76). He explains that a woman “debe admirar [en su hombre] lo que no comprende: las ideas” (82). He even offers the old-fashioned model of Santa Teresa as the ideal woman (83). It is here that the novel creates problems of credibility: if Magda is so liberated and

strong, how is it that she allows Eduardo to speak to her like this? In fact, Magda never responds to Eduardo: she only listens to him, as if she were already complying with his ideas about the behavior of the ideal woman. This contradiction in Magda's character highlights the anxieties discussed in previous chapters that existed even among "progressive" theosophical intellectuals with respect to the figure of the modern woman.

The centrality of theosophy to intellectual life in La gringa can be seen for the first time in chapter 5, when Magda and Eduardo take a walk. Eduardo pontificates on themes such as the "indigenous problem," the spiritual and individualist nature of tropical America, the dependence of civilization on the savage man, the importance of an intellectual education, Krausism, anti-imperialism, Unionism, and the modern woman (49-61). Characteristically, Magda listens attentively without sharing her ideas or responding to those of Eduardo. At times she offers a polite question in order to advance her boyfriend's diatribes. Despite Magda's fulfilling Eduardo's fantasy of a mute female audience, her gracious compliance with his one-sided conversation also implies that she is his only available audience. In this way, Magda's quiet presence works to undermine Eduardo's success as an editorialist in that it betrays his lack of interested readers and listeners. It is not surprising, then, that Eduardo later expresses in his editorials his frustration at having lost his impact as a journalist. When he is in front of the typewriter, he complains of the "lugares comunes de esta sociología americana que no acaba nunca de formularse. Lugares comunes, tan grávidos de verdad, pero tan perfectamente

inútiles hasta que un gobierno honrado y enérgico no comenzó a realizarlos” (95). It can be assumed from the novel, then, that so much has already been written about theosophy and nationalist regeneration that the topics had become commonplace by 1935.

The second part of the novel informs us that Eduardo once had a much more exciting journalistic career when he participated with both ink and bullets in the revolution against Estrada in 1920. Theosophical themes, now considered “lugares comunes” in 1935, were used at that time as philosophical munitions against the dictator when the Unionist Party overthrew his government. La gringa places the revolutionary episode of Eduardo’s life in the central part of the novel, thus underlining the central importance of this time period and the relationship between revolutionary and theosophical discourse. The analepsis of Eduardo’s revolutionary activity temporally disorients the reader for its first few pages, further casting a parallel between the dictatorships of Ubico and Estrada. Held together by the novel’s structure, the discursive links between theosophy and revolution are revealed, thus indicating that both Estrada and Ubico were ruthlessly oppressive and deserved to be overthrown for not complying with the ideals of human dignity and social harmony. By structurally and temporally collapsing the regime of Ubico onto that of Estrada, Wyld disguises his criticism of Ubico as his protagonist mourns the inability of the intellectual class to start a revolution under the present dictator.

The possibilities of political subversion in La gringa (which was published by the Tipografía Nacional, Guatemala’s official state press under Ubico) demonstrate

how the novel positioned itself unstably with respect to dictator's regime. In his prologue, Wyld writes, "El actual Presidente de Guatemala, General don Jorge Ubico, trabaja por hacer de la república 'una nación proba, rica, culta y sana'. [...] Este libro, en su modestia, intenta colaborar en el aspecto cultural-estético de aquel programa de gobierno" (3). Through this statement, the prologue serves as a strategic frame for a novel that exhibits several subversive elements and also earns the support—both political and financial—of the Guatemalan State. Thus, we see both sides of the cultural "collaboration" of La gringa: not only does it ostensibly comply with the government's cultural agenda, but it also implies that a nation cannot be rich, cultured, or healthy under the rule of tyranny. Although La gringa does not exhibit the political insubordination of other novels, such as Asturias's El señor presidente (which, although written in 1932, could not appear in print until 1946 due to its overt comparison of Ubico to Estrada), it demonstrates that very subtle criticism about dictatorial regimes could be published when interwoven with the discourse of theosophy. Readers of La gringa who understood the far-reaching tenets of theosophy would have also recognized the inconspicuous strands of dissent present in Wyld's novel.

Just as Wyld was able to use theosophy to veil his political criticisms of dictatorship, female poets were also able to use theosophy to hide political statements from censors. As a fashionable discourse in Central America in the 1930s, theosophy in literature could be dismissed by uncritical readers as a passing trend. Seen this way, theosophy takes on a superficial nature that belies its ability to

signify social and political dissent. In that theosophy, like most spiritual discourses, has also often carried connotations of femininity, it also offered female poets with an additional veil because it complied with stereotypes of poetisa aesthetics.⁸ As Horan has said in a different context, “Theosophy allowed women to speak, but not as sexual beings” (“Alternative Identities” 148).⁹ In the case studies to follow, we will see how Acuña and Lars capitalized on this gendered aspect of theosophy and poetisa aesthetics, as they assert their divine identities as both female poets and mystics in their early collections. Suárez’s powerful poem, “Compréndeme” (Los templos de fuego, 1931) will then illustrate how theosophy provided women with a mainstream, non-erotic language in which they could express their desire for spiritual, social, and sexual emancipation.

To contextualize Acuña’s early poetry, let us return to La gringa, in which Eduardo, the theosophist revolutionary and journalist, visits with his buddy, Rafael, who has “treinticinco años viriles” and is “leído y literaturizante” (275). The two men have the following conversation:

Rafael ojea un diario:

—Unos versos de Domitila Sánchez... Hombre, Eduardo:

¿qué impresión te dan las mujeres que escriben para... los hombres?

[...]

—[...] Oye: la mujer que escribe comete dos pecados:

aumenta el número de libros y disminuye el de mujeres.¹⁰ (276)

It is clear that Eduardo—the Guatemalan intellectual par excellence—thinks that women have no place in intellectual or literary life. Interpreted as a biographical extension of Wyld, one of the most influential thinkers in Guatemala during the first half of the twentieth century, Eduardo and the Guatemalan lettered city he represents leave little hope for the incorporation of women into Central American intellectual space.

Fortunately, if Angelina Acuña read La gringa, she was apparently not deterred from writing and publishing. In the company of the Nosotras Generation of female poets, she was not the only woman who began to publish poetry in Guatemala in the 1930s, but as she was one of the most prolific (In addition to Nosotras, her poetry appeared in the daily, El Imparcial, and in bound collections.), she is to be considered a pioneer. Like Lars, Acuña gained entrance into the lettered city not by abandoning or undermining her sexual difference, but by strategically employing what I have outlined in chapter 1 as poetisa aesthetics. For example, the themes of many of her poems, such as “Canto a la Madre Modelo,” are centered on subject matters conventionally considered “feminine”—and, therefore, uncontroversial—in their era. Moreover, Acuña’s work generally appeared in Nosotras, Guatemala’s premiere magazine for women, whose female readership and gendered content also framed her work with “feminine” expectations. With such a prudent thematic, Acuña could not have been easily accused of having written “for men.” Moreover, with a style revealing heavy traces of romanticismo and modernismo, Acuña realized a poetic considered appropriate for a Central American woman of her day. She also

participated in a number of poetry contests and pageants, or declamations, that constituted a suitable medium for the participation of women in the world of letters.¹¹ Especially at the beginning of her career, Acuña took advantage of the poetry contest circuit in order to gain recognition and publication in local newspapers. The poem, “Canto a la Madre Modelo,” won first place in the Concurso del Poema a la “Madre Modelo” in Quetzaltenango in 1936 (La gavilla 217), “Ofrenda lírica” won first prize in the Concurso Centroamericano in 1939 (La gavilla 71) and “Guatemala primaveral” received honorable mention in los Juegos Florales de Quezaltenango in 1939 (Albizúrez, Historia III 280).

The poetry of Acuña did not offend Carlos Wyld, who wrote in the Diario de Centro América in 1944: “Entre el escaso grupo de escritoras centroamericanas sobresale el fino, el delicado don poético de Angelina Acuña, [es] acendrado en mieles de la campiña” (cited in Valenzuela 91). With such gendered phrases as “fino,” “delicado,” and “mieles de la campiña,” it appears that Wyld did not think that Acuña was committing “sins” with her poetry or that she was writing “for men.” As if followed by Wyld’s favorable opinion of her, throughout her career Acuña was known as the “Poetisa Excelsa” of Guatemala, suggesting that, although she received much respect from the Guatemalan public, the title poetisa positioned her apart from masculine, universal literature.¹² Although Acuña’s strategies of sexual difference often functioned too well, in that they labeled her a “poetisa,” her rhetoric also opened doors for her and other female writers. Close readings reveal how Acuña negotiated the cultural discourses of the 1930s—especially theosophy and

Unionism—towards an implicit feminism and political commentary. In this way, she proves that Wyld's protagonist and his "virile" friends did not enjoy a monopoly over intellectual discourse in Guatemala: female writers also took on politically significant themes, albeit often in understated ways that reinforced conventional, negative stereotypes of femininity.

The formal properties of poetry, including form, meter, and rhyme, create special relationships between sign and referent due to spatial and aural plays on words. Poetry thus enables semantic slippages that fuse sexual difference and theosophy in Acuña's poetic. Indeed, her theosophy does not reveal itself on its own, but rather through how it is situated syntactically in relation to indications of sexual difference. In the two poems that I will analyze here, "Canto a la Madre Modelo" and "Guatemala primaveral," Acuña's "feminine" poetic trappings act as textual disguises that allow the poet to appear not to be writing "for men," thus admitting her access to the literary establishment precisely because she does not present a direct threat to masculine hegemony. Nevertheless, the presence of theosophical tropes in her verse tells us that her verse has more to offer than a bland poetisa aesthetic and permits her to take part in the broader cultural conversations of her day. Additionally, insofar as she articulates theosophist discourse through gendered poetic speakers and/or subjects, her brand of theosophy, like that of Lars and Suárez, can be considered feminist insofar as it imagines a divine feminine. Theosophy, which brings spiritual philosophies from many cultures to bear on Western religious beliefs, furnishes Acuña with the language and imagery to

envision a maternal, feminine divinity that challenges the patriarchal religious mores of the Christian tradition.

In “Canto a la Madre Modelo” (1936), which inscribes itself in Christianity with references to the via-crucis (11) and cross (12), the poetic voice cunningly turns the institution of a masculine, patriarchal God and Trinity on its ear. Through apostrophe, the first stanza establishes a feminine Holy Trinity characterized by its maternity:

Urna, donde el misterio de la Mano Creadora
florece en la recóndita armonía
del amor y la vida que atesoras,
Madre, tu eres el Canto Supremo de la Vida! (1-4)

Here the urn stands in place of a physical female body, a vessel or a womb, which can give birth to God made flesh. In her interpretation of the conception of Christ, theosophist Annie Besant also characterizes the Virgin as a vessel: “...the Holy Spirit, who, overshadowing the [Virgin’s womb], poured into it His life, thus preparing it to receive the life of the Second Logos, who took this matter as the vehicle for His energies” (125). The fact that urns are also frequently used to contain the ashes of the dead also links this image to a crucified Christ, resurrected or reborn through the uterine connotations of the image. One could also interpret these images as having to do with Isis and Osiris of Egyptian mythology, which shares in a master narrative of death and rebirth. The “Mano Creadora,” in that it is capitalized, seems to refer to God or a divine creator; however, because the

appellation makes use of a body part (a hand), the creator deity here could be genderless (as hands pertain to both sexes) or feminine in the sense that in Spanish, the noun hand takes the feminine article. The use of the adjective creadora in the feminine serves further to underline what I see as a grammatical play here on the gender of the divine. In the fourth verse, the name “Madre” (which could be recognizing the Virgin Mary as an addition to the Trinity) and “Canto Supremo de la Vida” is tied to the first verse’s “Urna” and “Mano Creadora” through a parallel structure, in that both verses begin and end with concepts that name the divine. By placing these four titles in parallel structure, the poem suggests that the four names are interchangeable as four faces to one divine.

Further overshadowing a masculine characterization of God the Creator, the poetic voice asserts in the fourth verse that Madre is the Canto Supremo de la Vida. The word canto, or “song,” denotes poetry, poiesis, or “to make.” Through the Nicene Creed, which professes faith in “God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth,” Western Christianity indelibly casts God as the patriarchal creator. By stating that the Madre is the Canto, Acuña effectively subsumes that masculine identity into a maternal divinity. Packed with plurisignification, this poem does not stop at feminizing the concept of the creator, but it also juxtaposes man’s “pálidas ofrendas” (15) with the “dádivas henchidas” (18) of the Madre Modelo:

¡son pálidas ofrendas los himnos y las palmas
que el hombre te consagra para premiar tu ciencia!

Tú, la Madre Modelo que has sembrado en el mundo

simientes que florecen en dádivas henchidas

de frutos que sustentan los ideales fecundos... (15-19; my emphasis)

The text emphasizes the limitations of man compared to the infinite goodness of the Mother and also diminishes his stature and contributions when compared to hers.

“Canto a la Madre Modelo” highlights the creativity of a maternal divinity again when it refers to the “suave modeladora de seres y conciencias” (14), which links the modifier “modeladora” to the “Madre Modelo” of the poem’s title and the title of the poetry contest in which it won first prize. With this verse, we also catch a glimpse of a theosophical discourse of nationalist spiritualism in that it could also refer to the concept of republican motherhood, the belief that mothers have the important patriotic responsibility of raising good citizens. Although republican motherhood had its roots in the nineteenth century and has little place in contemporary radical feminism, it was an important step towards today’s feminisms in that it placed importance on women’s role (however indirect) in nation building. Francesca Miller reminds us: “Rather than reject their socially defined role as mothers, as wives, Latin American feminists may be understood as women acting to protest laws and conditions which threaten their ability to fulfill that role” (74). In 1936, republican motherhood provided a significant way for women to participate in the political and theosophist regeneration of the Central American patria grande. Thus, through this image of republican motherhood and a feminine vision of the divine, “Canto a la Madre Modelo” opens a dialogue with theosophy that advocates

women's participation in nationalist regeneration and offers an alternative model to patriarchal Christian theology.

Like “Canto a la Madre Modelo,” which won first place in the Concurso del poema a la “Madre Modelo” in Quetzaltenango in 1936, the poem “Guatemala primaveral” also won a contest, taking honorable mention in the 1939 Juegos Florales de Quezaltenango (Albizúrez Historia III 280). Although there are no direct indications of gender in the poem with respect either to the addressee or the poetic speaker (who is never identified in the first person), Guatemala takes on feminine attributes through copious imagery of flowers and spring, which carry conventional feminine connotations. Moreover, the dramatic and overdetermined tone of the poem locates its aesthetic in modernismo, a literary movement considered out of fashion in 1939, but, as we saw in chapter 1, still regarded as appropriate for women writing poetry in the 1930s in Central America because its decorativeness and apparent refusal to take on controversial subjects.¹³ The majority of the verses in arte mayor, the (ab)use of synaesthesia (“la voz del perfume, tonalidad de esmaltes, melodies de luz” [15]) and images taken from the plastic arts (“esmaltes” [8, 16, 53], “el exótico hechizo de una japonería tropical” [33]) drive home its modernista inspiration that inscribes this text with a particularly drippy poetisa aesthetic (Perhaps it is due to its overindulgence in the poetisa aesthetic that this poem only won honorable mention instead of first place...). In spite of the fact that it appears to be a bad poem on its surface, reading “Guatemala primaveral” with attention to how modernismo works with theosophist discourse reveals how the poem acts as an

element of oppositional feminine culture in that the poem's superficial poetisa traits act to disguise for a more subversive subtext.

Subtext aside, even the superficiality of "Guatemala primaveral" can be interpreted as political commentary. In his book about the politics of Latin American Modernism, Gerard Aching writes:

Embedded in the polemics over what may be termed the movement's escapist or evasive detachment is an imposed anachronism in which certain critics have tended to juxtapose the modernistas' aloofness to contemporary notions of cultural work within liberal, democratic regimes. According to this line of reasoning, these poets and writers were deemed apolitical [...]; as producers of high art, they would not or could not define national culture. (3; original emphases)

Viewing modernismo as apolitical and escapist helps to confine earlier readings of "Guatemala primaveral" to an emphasis on its nineteenth-century literary taste and to a poetisa aesthetic. Since modernismo was considered apolitical, it would have been seen as a poetic mode fitting for women writing in the twentieth century. The escapist, modernista fare of this poem, however, can be seen as a commentary on the oppression of the Ubico regime: it flaunts its apparent lack of substance as a way to imply that it is unsafe to say anything of import.¹⁴ At the same time, the apparent escapism of modernismo is also used to mask a national allegory of an anarchist revolution that takes place as the flowers bloom in uprising every spring. In verse 54, the poem describes Guatemala as having an "alma de flor" (54; my emphasis).

Here the floral essence of the country resonates with the personification of revolutionary flowers in the central-most stanza of the poem: “las flores se sublevan y estallan ¡anarquistas!” (34). The personification of these rebelling, anarchist flowers, coupled with Guatemala’s flowery soul, cultivates a diverse population of subjects:

Los claveles se retan en matices violentos y atrevido,
 Hay metralhas de mieles y de sol confundidos;
 Temor en las violetas, palidez de gardenias,
 Rezan las pasionarias de insignias nazarenas
 Y en cándidos alardes pacifistas
 Tremolan su blancor las azucenas.....! (40-45)

These flowers, personified as Guatemalan subjects, not only exhibit the bellicose human emotions of violence, daring, confusion, fear, devotion, and pacifism, but they also wield weaponry and insignias indicative of warfare. In this way, the flowers—a conventionally “feminine” and innocuous image—veil an allegorical popular revolt celebrated in “Guatemala primaveral” by the poetic voice.

Read in relation to its historical context, the anarchist soul of Guatemala can be interpreted here as a flowery declaration of popular will against the terror of the Ubico regime, a sweet-smelling revolt that calls for change. The poem’s occultist elements, such as “cósmicas teurgias” (11), the pentagram (18; a pagan symbol and also the symbol of the goddess Venus) and a reference to paganism (26), support such a political reading because theosophical ideals rejected totalitarianism in favor

of a universal harmony that respected human diversity (represented in this poem as biodiversity). As a key component of theosophy (remember Eduardo in La gringa, who earned a living giving occultist conferences after the revolution [219]), occultism can be interpreted here as pertaining to theosophist discourse, which was often used to criticize the Central American dictatorships. Further supporting the connotative link between flowers, occultism, theosophy, and political commentary the poem's dedication to Acuña's poet friend, Magdalena Spínola, also inscribes the poem with subversion. As already mentioned, Spínola was a practicing theosophist whose ostracism by the Ubico regime made Acuña nervous when they collaborated on a 1938 poetry anthology.

By negotiating her socially-determined status as a poetisa in subtle ways, Acuña's early poetry took part in the stylish cultural discourses of theosophy and political criticism. By demonstrating that she was able to handle these typically male-dominated discourses, she also was able to put her foot in the door of the lettered city. Whereas Magda of La gringa takes off for Europe when she can no longer put up with Eduardo's misogyny, Acuña confronts society's misogyny in a different way. By strategically manipulating the cultural codes of her day through the formalist and linguistic conventions of poetry, Acuña indirectly inscribes a place not only for herself in Central American letters, but also for female poets who will follow her.

Acuña was not alone in lyricizing theosophy in order to prove herself a fashionable, worthy poet. In her early poetry, Lars combined the spiritual discourse

of theosophy (which was introduced to El Salvador by her father, Peter Patrick Brannon) with the gendered discourse of mysticism in order to fashion a place for herself and other women in the patriarchal world of Central American letters. In turn, this gendered spiritualism would serve as a convenient discourse in which to weave subversive political commentary so that it was not immediately apparent at the surface. Like Acuña, Lars strategically blended theosophy into a poetisa aesthetic that made her non-threatening to readers and allowed her to take political risks in her poetry that otherwise would not have been possible or accepted. A look at the critical receptions of Lars's first collections, Estrellas del pozo (1934), and Canción redonda (1937), illustrates how Lars was able to affect a public persona of poetisa that harmonized with the fashionable language and ideology of theosophy.

In a commentary preceding Estrellas del pozo, anthologist Carmen González Huguet remarks that Lars was very critical of her early poems. González Huguet also signals Lars's continued dislike of her work in Canción redonda (1937), made evident by the fact that she only chose nine of the twenty-one poems from this second collection for her 1973 anthology, Obras escogidas (189).¹⁵ In 1956 Julieta Carrera similarly criticized Lars's early work, saying that "la gran poesía [se ve] mutilada en sus poemas anteriores por el formalismo y la preocupación religiosa" (228). Rereading two of Lars's early poetry collections with attention theosophical discourse and its possibilities of political subversion, however, not only demonstrates to what extent her poetic voice changed over the years, but also gives us insight into what we will see is a coded negotiation of language and convention as she strove to

articulate her identity as a female poet in the male lettered city. As Alicia Ostriker explains in the context of Anglo-American poetry, the female poet has traditionally “had to state her self-definition in code form, disguising passion as piety, rebellion as obedience” (“The Thieves” 315). To this end, Lars employs what Carrera identifies as her “preocupación religiosa,” her code for both expressing and transcending her sexual difference, for inscribing her experiences both as writing and written subject.

Although Lars’s poetry can be conservatively read as a mere continuation of the tradition of Christian mysticism, it is important to note that, at the time of publication, her poems were received as theosophical texts. Critics even used theosophical language to describe the mysticism of Estrellas en el pozo for reviews in Repertorio americano. For example, Alejandro Alvarado Quiros wrote that Lars

Tiene en su interior algo que la aleja a golpes de ala, de la frivolidad femenina. Cultiva la lectura y ama la filosofía. Se siente atraída por los problemas del inquietante más allá y quisiera encontrar la clave del destino humano para orientar su propia vida y revelarnos después... los misterios encontrados en sus peregrinaciones espirituales. (294; my emphases)

In another review, Rómulo Tovar wrote that “El poeta es un agente del Universo” (185) and that in Lars’s poetry, “Cada verso es un Cosmos como cada estrella... La Verdad está en el eterno canto y ella ha escuchado ese eterno canto. Es la ofrenda que nos hace en el milagro de sus celestiales palabras” (186; my emphases). In yet another review, León Pacheco commented that Estrellas en el pozo “no tiene nada de

la filosofía del Ecclesiastés y sí mucho del Kheyyam” (160). This critic also mentions the influences of Zarathustra, Isis, Christianity, theosophy, and the Rosy Cross.

In Estrellas en el pozo, Lars’s poetry shows a general preoccupation with the speaker’s identity as a poet. In the sonnet “Poeta soy,” the third poem of the collection that serves as an arte poética, the speaker affirms that

Poeta soy... y vengo, por Dios mismo escogida,
a soltar en el viento mi canto de belleza,
a vivir con más alto sentido de nobleza. (9-11)

Here the speaker asserts her poetic sensibility, as if anxious to impress upon her reader that she writes with the authority of a God-given vocation. This self-justification is apparent throughout the collection. For example, in “Estrellas en el pozo” the speaker expresses that “... fue por gracia d’El que no Se nombra: / mi anhelo...” (49-50). In this way, the speakers throughout Estrellas en el pozo express their blessing and calling not only as poets, but also as mystics. Perhaps it is this mystic quality that prompts Carrera to compare Lars to Teresa de Jesús (227).

This mysticism functions as a rhetorical strategy of oppositional feminine by both reinforcing and transcending the confines of sexual difference. Because spirituality has traditionally been accepted and expected as a “natural” part of womanhood, it provided female writers with a safe topic that would not call the unwanted attention of phallogocentric critics. To this end, critic Sonia Ticas argues that mysticism in Salvadoran women’s writing acts as a both a legitimizing factor against which men cannot argue and as a kind of immunity, or a “vocación divina

que los hombres no pueden destruir” (“Escritoras” n.p.). By serving as a “safe” genre for women, spiritual writing has traditionally provided female poets with a socially acceptable thematic for couching expressions of subjectivity that, expressed more explicitly, might cause the poet trouble. In Plotting Women, Jean Franco demonstrates how asserting a mystical persona—a gendered identity ironically imposed by the patriarchal religious system—not only allowed women to write in the colonial era, but also afforded them “a space of potentially transgressive feminine desire,” which would otherwise be silenced or punishable by the Inquisition (4). Franco cites French feminist Luce Irigaray, who celebrates mysticism because it represents an essentially feminine experience that exists outside the parameters of linguistic representation (8-9). Following this line of thought, I suggest that the mystic—unable to express herself with logos—resorts to poiesis, or creative semantic play that lends itself to multiple subject positions (as woman, as poet, as mystic) that otherwise might be streamlined or silenced by phallogocentrism. Franco contests Irigaray’s essentialism, however, by stating that mystical writing was not necessarily “essentially feminine but rather that it was strategically so” (9). Strategically essentialist, mystical discourse not only buttressed stereotypes of women as irrational and devout, but also used these gendered stereotypes to stake out a place for women in literary and philosophical discourse.

The representation of the relationship between the speaker and God throughout Estrellas en el pozo is rooted in sexual difference. The speaker’s identification with and exaltation of traditional female roles reinforce gendered

stereotypes of women as passive receivers of God the Father's inspiration. It also characterizes Lars, by way of her verse, as a devoted Catholic mother, an expected role for Latin American women in the 1930s. In fact, despite Lars's biography of extramarital affairs, divorce, continent-wide travel and participation in male-dominated literary circles, González Huguet writes that "en esos años [de la escritura de Estrellas en el pozo], Claudia se convierte en una mujer hecha y derecha, al pasar por la experiencia de un primer amor contrariado, el matrimonio y la maternidad" (109). Certainly such a characterization—as a "mujer hecha y derecha" who, implicitly, did not threaten social or literary convention—would have helped the poet sell her first books and be accepted by the literary establishment in her day insofar as she would not have posed a threat to masculinity or patriarchal social structure. Significantly, by being known as a "mujer hecha y derecha," Lars also would have gained credibility as a poet writing from a "feminine" position. These constructions of her public persona could have become entangled with the written subjects of her poems, again resulting in a mix of subjectivities.

Lars's mystic themes also express a fascination with theosophy, which can be seen in poems such as "Canción de una noche de enero" and "Adivino en el tiempo." In the first poem, the speaker sings to the winter moon, a

negra diosa de ritos vedados:
cabalísticas cifras dibuja
en oscuros rincones callados
donde cuece sus yerbas la bruja. (29-32)

In “Adivino en el tiempo,” the speaker reads “las líneas en [su] mano” (2). These references can be interpreted as amplifying the ways in which one can have access to the divine. Such occult practices bypass the monopoly on divine access that men were enjoying in Christianity (with men as the only priests and lay leaders) by including women as goddesses, spiritual leaders, and healers. In “Canción de una noche de enero,” the speaker refers to the powers of “comadrona, nodriza, madrina” (33) in conjuring the moon, that “negra diosa” (29). In addition to providing a vision of women as spiritual caretakers, the speaker also characterizes the moon as a feminine divinity. In this way, she could be inscribing a feminine imaginary at this early stage in her writing, which Luce Irigaray describes as crucial to feminist solidarity and liberation:

I am well enough acquainted with women’s movements to know that they lack a rallying point. What they lack, at the very least, is the symbol of a divine mother... In order for women truly to come together, there must be a reinterpretation of the meaning of all religious traditions and an examination of those which leave room for the genealogies of holy women. (“Equal to Whom?” 75-6)

As an ideological institution, Western religions interpolate men as subjects based on their direct access to God the Father. Women, on the other hand, are subjected to men and God. By providing both feminine access to the divine and a feminine face on the divine here, Lars can be seen as providing both her writing and reading

subjects with a point of solidarity and a way of imagining themselves out of the confines of phallogocentrism and patriarchal social norms.

In several poems in Estrellas en el pozo, the speaker can be read as exploring new ways for women to relate to the universe and the divine. In “Vida, yo te bendigo,” the speaker becomes a sort of priestess who, through her body, blesses Life: “Yo te bendigo, Vida, por todo el cuerpo mío: / carne, nervios y sangre, y sentidos y voz” (17-18). By calling attention to the body as sacred vessel, the poem implies a certain eroticism that can be read both as subversive and as fitting within the tradition of Spanish medieval mystic poetry. In “Bajo tu mirada,” the speaker, like Christ, wears a crown of thorns. Because there is no marker of either the speaker’s or the addressee’s gender in this poem, this union is more egalitarian, as the power struggles inherent in a heterosexual relationship are left unmarked. Moreover, the fact that the speaker is ungendered allows her/him to move beyond gender as both construct and confine. Thus, s/he fuses her/his identity with an ungendered suffering, priest-like “you” (also characteristic of Christ), whom s/he tells to bless her/him and “envuélveme en la seda de una inmensa ternura” (13) in a mystical, erotic union. Viewed in this way, “Bajo tu mirada” works to re-vision power relationships among men and women both in society and religion. In the mystical poems of both “Vida, yo te bendigo” and “Bajo tu mirada,” a spotlight on the speaker’s body recalls Braidotti’s (and by extension, Deleuze’s) vision of subjectivity, in which “the key point is the embodied subject’s capacity for encounters and interrelation... desire and yearning for interconnections”

(Metamorphoses 99). The ungendered speakers of both poems further point to a nomadic poetics insofar as they articulate an erotic encounter between two subjects who, because ambiguously sexed, embody difference simply as a speaking “I” and a listening “you.”

The poems “Vida, yo te bendigo” and “Bajo tu mirada” also map the coordinates, or the correspondence, between these two subjects: one divine (or, in the case of “Bajo tu mirada,” at least Christ-like) and one incarnate. The humanity of the latter is communicated through the emphasis on the body of the speaking subject. But in “Dos sonetos a un místico,” the speaker questions the distinction between mortality and divinity by questioning the disembodiment of the Sacred:

¿Por qué quieres vivir vida divina
si de la forma humana estás vestido?
¿Acaso el mismo Dios no se adivina

tras de la oscura puerta del sentido?
Si el alma entre la carne va escondida,
¿por qué este empeño en sofocar la vida? (9-14)

Here the speaker, identified as female, not only challenges the chastity of the male “tú,” who denies the speaker’s advances with his “voluntad de acero” (8), but she also highlights her questioning of the will and knowledge of God by enjambling this question between two tercets. By playing off the sexual connotations of carne, the speaker equates “sofocar la vida” with putting out the flames of passion, of

eroticism, that result in the transcendental unions of “Vida, yo te bendigo” and “Bajo tu mirada.” Here transcendental yearning mixes with physical desire, blurring the limits between the sacred and the profane, thereby reaffirming both the sensuality and spirituality—perhaps one and the same—of the female speaker. The expression of sexual desire fuels her beyond the expectations of poetisa aesthetics and gender norms. She wields her sexual difference as a marker of agency, releasing her femininity from some male prescriptions of ladylike images or behavior.

Various poems in Estrellas en el pozo express an unfulfilled, mystical desire, or anhelo, for the type of transcendental union just mentioned. “Estrellas en el pozo” and “Madre” mention this anhelo, characterized as a need to write, or to hold a fistful of stars, in the first poem and as maternal impulse in the second. This desire is destabilizing insofar as it can be construed as both transcendent and physical, a new spin on the Freudian libido, the threatening force in women that can lead to hysteria or promiscuity. In her book on mysticism and sexual difference, Amy Hollywood cites Helene Cixous’s juxtaposition of mysticism and hysteria, in which repressed desires work as a liberating force against the oppressive power of religious institutions and social structures (4). The link between desire and ethics can also be seen in the mystical poetry of Lars. With respect to ethics and mysticism, Hollywood posits that the ethical consequences of women’s mystical writing has habitually been ignored, thus “skewing accounts of the relationship between ethics and mysticism and upholding the picture of ‘women’s’ erotic and visionary mysticism as particularly escapist in its pursuit of spiritually sensory experiences of

the divine” (11). Yet Lars’s poetry is neither escapist fare nor hedonistically erotic. The transcendent desire and spiritual gifts she expresses as poet and mystic imply a sense of responsibility that the speaker of “Poeta soy” makes clear: “¡Y las fuerzas eternas que rigen el destino / han de volverme polvo si equivoco el camino!” (13-14). Throughout Estrellas en el pozo, the speaker refers to the wretchedness around her, which, perhaps a reference to the plight of El Salvador’s poor, can be interpreted as a commentary on social injustice with respect to how women are treated, or as a mystic lament for those who do not enjoy divine inspiration as she does.

Such a concern for El Salvador’s poor can also be seen as a critique of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, El Salvador’s dictator from 1931-1944, who practiced theosophy but was expelled from the Salvadoran Theosophical Society after ordering the massacre of over 30,000 peasants in an alleged communist uprising led by Farabundo Martí in 1932.¹⁶ Recent scholarship has begun to characterize Martínez’s massacre, which met international outcry by detractors in 1932, as a continuation of the Conquest and an ethnic cleansing campaign.¹⁷ Seen in this light, Lars’s poetry takes on a political meaning representative of theosophical discourse, which called for the humane treatment of indigenous peoples and their incorporation into the citizenry. In “Canto del viaje de regreso” (115-16)—which can be read as an autobiographical return trip from Costa Rica, where Lars lived during the Salvadoran peasant revolt of 1931-32, to El Salvador—she writes that “me avergüenza el lote de la humana miseria” (28). In “Nuevo día se incia” she implores God not to hide from her “la miseria del mundo” (14). Given the extreme repression

of Martínez's regime after the peasant massacre of 1932, the presence of even these few possible social critiques permit a subversive interpretation in that they put the poet at risk of being seen as a political dissident, despite the fact that the collection was published in San José. Here her persona as poetisa and mystic may have veiled her dissidence, as her good-girl reputation might dissuade a reader from interpreting these references as criticisms of the Salvadoran dictator.

This attention to those less fortunate will continue to expose itself in Lars's poetry in Canción redonda (1937) as a social and even political preoccupation more grounded in the international social, economic, and human rights realities of the 1930s. In this collection, Lars continues to explore her mysticism not only thematically, but also formally. From its cover art by Salarrué, the collection announces itself as spiritually esoteric (see figure 1). Its theosophical implications were not lost on contemporary critics. For example, in a review for Repertorio americano, Alberto Guerra Trigueros wrote:

en azul gris y negro sobre blanco, la interesante y decorativa portada de Salarrué: cósmica, zodiacal; clara y Honda, nocturna y meridiana, anantárctica y praláyica, con su aguda flecha azul rasgando cosmos egros, cosmos blancos, costos grises, hasta la Ultima Thule de la Noche redonda.¹⁸ (298)

As if s/he were reading in the zodiac image of the book's cover his/her future vocation as a poetic seer, sage, and interpreter of signs the mystical voice of the first poem of the collection, "Canción redonda," airily speaks in the future tense:



Fig. 1. Cover of Canción redonda by Claudia Lars (San José: Ediciones del Convivio, 1937). Salarrué, a Salvadoran indigenist writer also known as an active theosophist who levitated in his back yard, designed the cover art of this collection. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

Aprenderé a mirar con ojos de vidente
 las cosas y los signos;
 y sabré descubrir, en cada acción, la causa
 y el humano sentido. (61-4)

Here the aguda stress, or the stress on the last syllable, of the verbs in the future tense urges the reader forward in the reading the collection's poems, which in turn present a more confident poetic voice that has shed layers of poetisa aesthetics.

Unlike Lars, whose early poetry is characterized by its poetisa rhetoric, Clementina Suárez spent little time writing in the gendered mode. Although her first collection, Corazón sangrante (1930) is tinged with modernismo and sentimentality, this outspoken poet has already abandoned poetisa aesthetics in 1931 with the publications of Iniciales, De mis sábados el último and Templos de fuego. In this last collection, the empowered poetic voices speak with passion and self-possession as they name their desires and outrage. The poems here, described by prologuist Hernán Robleto as a mix of “misticismo panteísta al ardor tropical” (2), provide an exciting counterpoint to Acuña and Lars, who use conventional poetisa aesthetics and theosophical discourse to pad the controversial ideals of a divine feminine, feminism, and political subversion. In “Compréndeme,” the female speaker addresses a “pobre hombre que [juzga] / conforme a [sus] leyes humanas” (21-2), imploring him to understand her power, which is expressed in both sexual and mystical terms, fusing the erotic and the ecstatic. Suárez packs into her poem theosophical language and concepts that function to shore up her energy that encompasses all reality: Primal Substances (2), the Arcane (23), the World (24), the rosy cross (25-6), the four sacred directions (29, 90), the four sacred elements (1-4, 31-2, 50-1), the golden key (37), universal rhythms (58), pentagram (61), and the All (71). Isotopic images of burning stars characterize the speaker's ardent desires as

out of this world: “boas estelares” (3, 33, 93), “caricias / terriblemente eléctricas” (4-5, 94-5), “beso luminoso” (10), “enciende mi carne; / enciende mis nervios; / enciende mis huesos; / enciende mi alma” (14-17), “pira” (18), “ardor mirífico” (28, 89), “ritmo sideral” (48), “besos terribles y astrales” (52), “astro divino” (72).

Formal and informal commands communicate the urgency with which the speaker wants to be understood: “Comprende” (20, 49, 86), “Vaya” (35), “Sabe” (44), “Mírame” (57). In the eleventh stanza, a list of commands increases the urgency, and therefore the rhythm, of the poem, thus functioning as poem’s climax: “habla, grita, protesta, lamenta, / llora, ruge, blasfema, maldice” (67-8), “sube” (72), “baja” (74), “anda” (75), “regresa y explica” (78), “di a gritos” (80). In that most of these verbs express strong physical and emotional feelings and movements that are often associated with sex, this poetic climax can be interpreted as both sexual and spiritual.

In Los templos de fuego, which includes such unashamedly erotic poems as “Sexo,” “Hombre Montaña,” and “El ruego,” the use of theosophical concepts in the poem “Compréndeme” does more than simply mine spirituality for sex. The eroticism of the poem conveys the powerful emotion of the speaker’s desire to be understood by her male partner, whose world of human laws are described as consisting of “la carroña sucia / de las poses sociales / creadas por tu mente” (41-3). Twice the speaker indicates that her partner believes her desire is “frívolo,” a gendered adjective that carries associations of a poetisa aesthetic and women’s not being taken seriously (27, 89). The speaker not only wants her partner to respect and understand her value as a divine being, but to share in her jouissance and the astral

freedom of her spiritual reality. In this sense, the verb comprender takes on both its definitions: to comprehend as “to understand” and “to comprise.” The speaker is urgent not only to be understood as an equal, respected being, but also to extend a sacred and liberating experience to another:

Sabe que existe un mundo
sin leyes ni preceptos,
donde todo se iriza
con los vapores ténues
del ritmo sideral.

Compréndeme ahora,
por qué el fuego y el agua,
por qué el viento y la tierra
me llenan de besos terribles y astrales. (44-52)

In this way, Suárez captures the vital appeal that theosophy holds for women and men: to be understood, to recognize the sacred and to act on it with passion, and to enjoy one another absolutely as equals in a world governed not by silly or corrupt human laws, but by the mutual respect and compassion that is derived from spiritual attunement.

With “Compréndeme,” Suárez comprehends the poetic possibilities of theosophy as ideology and discourse by expressing its limitlessness. Unlike Magda in La gringa, who silently listens to Eduardo’s speeches on theosophy and other

issues, Suárez speaks and enacts theosophical ideals that value women and men as equal participants in spiritual and social life. Nevertheless, at the end of the novel, Magda leaves Eduardo behind, opting for an independent life in Europe where (the reader hopes) she'll be able to seize the opportunity to speak for once. In Wyld's world of 1935, there was no place for an independent woman like Magdalena, and she was forced to leave in order to gain independence. Despite Wyld's version, however, there were Central American women who used theosophy as an opportunity to talk back and to participate as equals in intellectual life. Acuña, Lars, and Suárez—along with a number of other female writers who began publishing in the 1930s—engaged the likes of Eduardo in theosophical conversations of their own. Theosophy empowered women to different degrees by serving as an acceptable linguistic and behavioral code through which they could express themselves without male mediation. Although Guatemalan women had to wait until after Ubico was gone in 1944 to start a suffrage movement, in El Salvador women like Prudencia Ayala (who ran for president in 1930) had already introduced suffrage as a hot political topic on their own soil and won the vote in 1939. These women soon forced Eduardo and his compatriots to accept them as active participants—not just an audience—in their tertulias and national assemblies. Moreover, their theosophical ideals, which were shared by many male intellectuals, would continue to influence social and political issues, especially as the 1930s social movements of Sandino and Martí and underground resistance against Ubico morphed over the decades into the revolutionary movements of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in

Nicaragua, the Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional (FMLN) in El Salvador, and Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca (URNG) in Guatemala.

Close analyses of early poems by Acuña, Lars, and Suárez show how these used theosophical discourse to imagine a divine feminine and political change. By marrying an implicit feminism with theosophy, Acuña imagines a divine feminine that overturned the patriarchal order of traditional Christianity. Also, through her celebration of Guatemala, Acuña realizes the nationalist regeneration so crucial to Central American theosophy by casting Guatemala in a floral, fertile, and essentially feminine light. Ironically, by taking advantage of the stereotypical poetisa aesthetic, Acuña subverted patriarchal claims to the Fatherland and Father God. Lars, whose early poetry does not display theosophical jargon to the extent that Acuña's does, takes another, more subtle angle to theosophical discourse. Relying heavily on the gendered, poetic role of the mystic, the poems from Estrellas en el pozo include touches of theosophy that result in transitory subjectivities that cannot be pinned down. Later, in Canción redonda, these nomadic subjectivities—cloaked first and foremost by the poetisa—allow the speakers to hint at political criticism while sidestepping censure. More outspoken than her contemporaries in terms of sexuality, Suárez combines erotic and ecstatic discourse, taking theosophical ideals of gender equality as far as she can by couching sexual agency and desire in spiritual terms.

As Acuña, Lars, and Suárez differ in their negotiations of theosophy, they nevertheless engender both political criticisms and feminist claims that likely would

not have been acceptable in more explicit terms at the times of their publications. As a shaping trend in the early publications of female poets in the 1930s in Central America, not only did theosophy offer women the opportunity to be valued as equal citizens and intellectuals, but it also allowed women arriving in the lettered city to enter into conversation with their male colleagues. In this manner, the theosophy movement in Central America both aided in the advancement of women in the worlds of letters and politics and was consequently promoted by these women in various ways that ensured its survival as it was subsumed by revolutionary, testimonial, indigenist, New Age, and feminist discourses in the later twentieth century.

Notes

¹ There are several reasons why theosophy's influence is just now being considered.

As it was an alternative to more hegemonic religious practices in the area, such as Catholicism, it could have been overlooked. Simmel suggested that, as spiritualism runs counter to the scientific worldview, it is "silly and meaningless" and does not merit investigation (291); similar attitudes could have prevented scholars from seeing the very real ideological impact of theosophy at the turn of the century.

² Frequent articles on theosophists appearing in the magazines Nosotros and Amauta testify to a pan-American interest in the theosophy movement (See Montesano, Orzábal and "Una epidemia mística"). Casaús documents a veritable obsession with the theosophy of Krishnamurti in Joaquín García Monge's Costa Rican weekly, Repertorio americano (79). A similar obsession with spiritism and Eastern philosophies can be seen in Nicaragua's El Gráfico, as well as in Costa Rica's El Imparcial and La Época (Writings on theosophy from these Tico journals were compiled in 1917 in Sobre teosofía: Discusión solicitada.). Guatemala's El Imparcial, Nosotras, Azul and Alma América also frequently ran theosophist content.

³ For more on the ironic affiliations of Ubico and Martínez with the theosophy movement, see Krehm.

⁴ In 1930s Central America, the term feminism took on different connotations in different communities. In Guatemala among the Nosotras Generation and the Sociedad Gabriela Mistral, feminismo referred mostly to the promotion of women's

education and their cultural and civic formation. The term could also be used to refer to the nascent suffrage movement in place at the time.

⁵ In personal interviews, Claribel Alegría, Jorge Eduardo Arellano and Helena Ramos each linked the Rosy Cross with theosophy in Central America.

⁶ In 1998, Arturo Arias criticized Wyld Ospina for his “relación relativamente homóloga con la ideología ubiquista” and for seeking to “humanizar al máximo a los patrones [mientras] por el otro lado se persigue la deshumanización constante del maya” (44, 55). In a 2008 interview with Arias, he conceded that, thanks to the groundbreaking scholarship by Casaús, we can now re-evaluate this and other texts of the period for politically subversive subtexts.

⁷ From here, the title is coined when the North American businessman, Mr. Benton, compares Magda to a gringa, in this case a Western cowgirl.

⁸ For example, a 1935 article in Nosotras outlined women’s superior instinct for all things spiritual (Gordillo). The international theosophy movement was led by three women at different times, Madame Blavatsky, Katherine Tingley, and Annie Besant, in an era when few women occupied leadership roles, especially in religion. As a movement, theosophy championed gender equality and feminist organization. To this end, historian Joy Dixon writes about theosophy’s role in Britain’s suffrage movement in Divine Feminine.

⁹ In fact, Suárez couched much of her erotic desire in theosophical terms. For example, in “Compréndeme,” the speaker chastises man for not being able to understand her burning desire for divine union.

¹⁰ Domitila Sánchez appears to be fictitious, as I have found no reference to a poet by that name in my investigations.

¹¹ The Guatemalan city, Quetzaltenango, continues to have the annual Juegos Florales, the literary contest in which Acuña won prizes throughout the 1930s.

¹² Acuña’s friend and fellow poet, Magdalena Spínola, recounted for the newspaper El Imparical how Acuña came by this title: “El día 8 [de agosto de 1975] se llevó a cabo en la sede de la Asociación de Escritores y Amigos de Libro Nacional, en un acto lírico en el que se declaró a Angelina Acuña, ‘Excelsa Poetisa Nacional’” (103). Nevertheless, in an interview with Acuña in 1991, critic Judy Berry Bravo writes that in an interview with Acuña in 1991, “ella nos explicó enfática y dulcemente que entre los ‘poetas,’ ‘poetisas’ y ‘poetizes,’ ella se considera ‘poeta’” (30).

¹³ As a fin de siglo discourse, Latin American Modernism was greatly influenced aesthetically and philosophically by the international theosophy movement (García Giráldez “La patria grande” 163).

¹⁴ In fact, it has been noted by journalism historians, Trujillo, Borrayo, and Santa Cruz that there practically were no news items or political editorials in Guatemalan newspapers because censorship was so oppressive (30).

¹⁵ In collaboration with Matilde Elena López, Lars chose for her Obras escogidas only eight poems from the 41 poems in Estrellas en el pozo.

¹⁶ Journalist William Krehm documents how the dictator manipulated theosophy to legitimate his control, writing that he preferred to be called “maestro” over “Presidente” and that he convinced cabinet members that “invisible legions” watched over him and eavesdropped on conspirators (9). Krehm also quotes the dictator’s eccentric principle on the value of life: “It is a greater crime to kill an ant than a man—for a man on dying becomes reincarnated, while an ant dies dead” (7).

¹⁷ See Tilley, Gould, Almeida and Lindo-Fuentes, et. al.

¹⁸ Guerra’s review of Lars’s Canción redonda is actually very negative.

Nevertheless, the fact that she received reviews at all for her work is remarkable, as few other Central American female poets (if any) received such publicity or critical attention.

Chapter 4

Mestizaje and Custom Fitting the Huipil

Es necesario, mujer campesina, que conozcas el valor de tu
 saber. Cuando aprendas a leer sabrás de todas las bellas
 leyendas que se cuentan a propósito de la sabiduría de hilar y
 de tejer...[...] En los tiempos antiguos algunos poetas
 hicieron sus mejores versos mientras tenían ocupadas sus
 manos en el telar.

—Elena Torres, “Economía Doméstica, 7. Las telas”

(1933) 367.

Throughout Latin America, the 1920s and 30s were rocky decades in which nations had to re-imagine themselves in an increasingly global and modernized world. As we have seen, the negotiations of these modern identities were played out in gendered debates over literary taste and opinions of appropriate behavior, as well as spiritual values. Anxieties about modernization and national identity were also expressed among Central America’s criollo elite in discussions about what to do with the region’s indigenous populations, which were typically perceived as “backwards” and antithetical to modern progress. Tellingly, women and indigenous people were often discursively linked through theosophy, the spiritual movement discussed in the previous chapter that widely influenced Central American intellectuals of the 1920s and 30s. Theosophy valued both women and indigenous people, marginalized economically and politically, as equal citizens and promoted their incorporation into

national life. As many Central American female poets were also theosophists or influenced by theosophist thought, the theosophist equation (facile as it may be) of women with disenfranchised indigenous citizens likely inspired them in terms of poetic theme and political commitment to advocate for equal rights for women and indigenous subjects. In this chapter, we will see how discourses of mestizaje, which initially imagined a utopian culture of mixed races, converged with issues of nation-building and modernization and thereby created contradictory, often racist, views of assimilation and the romanticization of indigenous populations. By first considering the radio addresses of Mexican Sub-Secretary of Education, Elena Torres, which were broadcast and published throughout Central America, we will see how these assimilating discourses were often addressed to female audiences as they focused on aspects of hygiene and dress. We will then see how Central American female poets of the time period—specifically Guatemalan Olivia de Wyld (dates unknown) and Salvadorans Claudia Lars (1899-1974) and María de Baratta (1890-1978)—used feminine indigenous dress, or traje, as a common trope of indigeneity in their poetry. Whereas de Wyld followed the patriotic fashion among the Guatemalan criollo elite of dressing up in indigenous traje, the Salvadoran poets featured in this chapter demonstrate how indigenist literature could be interpreted in the 1930s to bolster both conservative and leftist political ideologies.

Progressive female poets, often inspired by theosophy, tried to circumscribe the phallocentrism of middle and upper-class society in Central America by attempting to identify with indigenous people in recognition of their shared social

inequalities. Writing about the narrative of Mexican Rosario Castellanos, who dealt with a similar situation through her contact with indigenous people in Mexico, critic Joanna O'Connell, describes the "situation of women writers who are interpellated through their class and racial positioning as owing allegiance to the colonizer, but who, as women, are also positioned in crucial ways as subordinate" (viii).

O'Connell explains that Castellanos's perceived solidarity with indigenous people is not a simple equation. She writes that the author

shows how the pain of sexism and racism prevent people from recognizing the suffering of others and from imagining solidarity.

[...] For Castellanos as intellectual to move from loyalty to integrity, she must come to understand her own contradictory positioning and find a way to choose new alliances. (3)

In a similar way, the female poets of my study, who preceded Castellanos by two decades, also struggled in choosing their alliances and in comprehending their complex positionings with respect to indigenous subjects. For non-indigenous intellectuals, this struggle became manifest on a more practical level in what was known as the "Indian Problem," or the dilemma between modernization and "backwards" indigenous peoples.¹

The "Indian Problem," as it was viewed by Western-influenced thinkers, was especially felt in Mesoamerica and the Andes, where today indigenous peoples still constitute a large part of the population. In 1928, Peruvian sociologist José Mariátegui described the issue as a moral dilemma that allowed whites to feel

superior to indigenous peoples. He wrote that no theorist, politician, or administrator who tries to “solve” the “Indian Problem” can escape the racism implicit in their motives: “No las salva a algunas su buena fe” (25). The only approach to the problem that held any merit to Mariátegui was socialist because it understood that the roots of the “Indian Problem” were economic:

Tiene sus raíces en el regimen de propiedad de la tierra. Cualquier intento de resolverla con medidas de administración o policía, con métodos de enseñanza o con obras de vialidad, constituye un trabajo superficial o adjetivo, mientras subsista la feudalidad. (25)

Elaborating on Mariátegui’s opinion, Andean historian María Elena García describes the “problem” as “shorthand for the cultural, economic and political legacies of conquest and colonialism” (63). In order to escape these legacies, Mariátegui’s Marxist analysis stated the need for land reform through revolution (Siete ensayos 32).

Mariátegui’s observations are as relevant to Central America in this period as they were in 1928 Peru. In fact, Mariátegui’s writings in defense of the indigenous poor were frequently featured in the Guatemalan daily, El Tiempo (Casás “El indio” 219). A theosophist, Mariátegui was held in high esteem among theosophist intellectuals in Central America, who turned to the Peruvian to help make their case for the equal citizenship of indigenous peoples one of their fundamental values. Costa Rica’s cultural magazine, Repertorio americano, also included frequent articles on indigenous social issues and culture and highlighted this interest in indigenous

culture by promoting Villacorta's newly translated Popol vuh (1927) and Mediz Bolío's El libro del Chilam Balam de Chumayel (1930), as well as the indigenist collection, Leyendas de Guatemala (1930), by Miguel Ángel Asturias. Despite Mariátegui's belief that education was only a superficial response to the "Indian Problem" because it could not liberate indigenous peoples from their economic realities, Central American intellectuals continued to seek the pedagogical solutions that Mariátegui's book condemned (32). In 1935, for example, Salvadoran sociologist Adolfo Herrera Vega published his answers to the "Indian Problem" in El indio occidental de El Salvador y su incorporación social por la escuela. Asserting the greatness of pre-Columbian civilizations in El Salvador, Herrera argues that the country's indigenous populations is capable of and deserves schooling to help them improve their socio-economic status. To similar ends in Guatemala, General Jorge Ubico (dictator from 1931-1944) patriotically endorsed the country's "pasado glorioso" and advocated the assimilation of the country's indigenous populations through education (Taracena Arriola Etnicidad 126, 259).

In addition to looking south to Mariátegui for dialogue on the "Indian Problem", Central American intellectuals also turned to the north. Having just ended a ten-year civil war, Mexico represented progressive social change for many Central Americans. In 1929, early cultural historian, Anita Brenner, noted Mexico's hold on the Central American revolutionary imagination:

Nicaraguans, Hondurans, Guatemalans, race if in political danger to the Mexican Embassy and from thence exile themselves to Mexico

City. These revolutionaries are there [to] find an ideological form already cast for their sentiments, and for their energies. They find it because they speak the same language in Mexican literature, and because they are similarly minded and moved, in Mexican pictures. (328)

Claribel Alegria has also commented that nearly every forward-thinking intellectual of her parents' generation looked to Mexico as a model for a more egalitarian society that promoted not only its artists and intellectuals, but also its working classes (personal interview). So strongly did Central Americans identify with the Mexican Revolution that in 1938, Nicaraguan poet and journalist, Aura Rostand, called for the reunification of Central America with Mexico under the auspices of the Revolution ("La patria mexicana" 2). Rostand's editorial in Repertorio americano was met with another by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, founder of Peru's Aprista Party, who reminded readers that the Mexican Revolution was essentially aprista and that "la unión mexicano-centroamericano debe ser por eso un gran ideal" (118). With this relationship between Mexico and Central America in mind, it is not surprising, then, that indigenous integration (read: assimilation) policies under the Mexican Revolution were also imitated and implemented in Central America.

In 1925, the Mexican Minister of Education and theosophist, José Vasconcelos, published La raza cósmica, which, despite its often racist language and implementations, ultimately envisioned a future spiritual and aesthetic utopia of united races and cultures: "llegaremos en América, antes que en parte alguna del

globo, a la creación de una raza hecha con el tesoro de todas las anteriores, la raza final, la raza cósmica ” (80). Vasconcelos’s concept of mestizaje gave intellectuals throughout Latin America a rhetoric with which to imagine a uniquely Latin, modern society that included indigenous citizens, and even Mariátegui praised his progressive framework (Siete ensayos 40-1).

Mestizaje in Central America has recently been revisited by scholars—such as those contributing to collection, Memorias del mestizaje (2004) edited by Euraque, Gould, and Hale—wishing to highlight the participation of subaltern groups in twentieth-century projects of nation-building. In his introduction to the volume, Hale emphasizes that the progressive “dream” of mestizaje was led by non-indigenous protagonists, especially leftist intellectuals who were attracted by its promises of progress and its symbol of cultural defiance to foreign imperialism, as well as its implicit “desindianización” (“Identidades” 24-5). Gould explains how national projects of mestizaje, inspired by the Mexican Revolution, differed in Guatemala versus in the other Central American republics of El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras.² In these latter countries, Gould explains, mestizaje was effectively used to disguise a predominantly indigenous national identity (“Proyectos” 60). In Guatemala, on the other hand, the discourse of mestizaje never achieved a racially or culturally unified populace, due in great part to its large, geographically isolated indigenous communities in the western part of the country.³

In the cultural discourses of the 1930s in both Central America and Mexico, the word campesino was understood as a code word to mean the rural, indigenous

poor. Historian Patricia Schell, for example, writes that in Mexico's rural education program, "Race, culture, ethnicity, and geography were conflated; urban people were racially mixed, while rural people were depicted as racially and culturally indigenous" (586). Further corroborating the conflation of campesino with indigenous, in her article on practical apparel, Torres categorically describes campesino clothing as indigenous traje: she includes the "cabeza de indio", white pants, huaraches, quixquemetles, chincuetes and huipiles among examples of "campesino" dress ("Economía doméstica, 6. Los vestidos" 319). In the Central American context, Guatemalan Sub-Secretary of Education equates campesino and indio by speaking of "redimir al campesino y al indio" (Solano 47) and "esa obligación de volver los ojos al campesino y al indio" (Solano 48). This equation between indigenous identity and the rural reality versus Europeanized identity and the urban setting plays into questions of modernity and progress, two key factors in how Revolutionaries in Mexico and non-indigenous intellectuals in Central America wanted to portray themselves in the early twentieth century. As a modernizing discourse, mestizaje required assimilating the indigenous into modernized, Western, urban culture.

In all of the Central American republics, education served as an important ideological instrument for the realization of mestizaje's ideals, particularly the glorification of the pre-Columbian past and the assimilation (often expressed in terms of modernization and civic empowerment) of indigenous citizens. Pedagogical publications of the 1930s in Repertorio americano and in other national presses

suggest that Central American intellectuals also explored Vasconcelos's practical educational policies—which were not in the spirit of Mariátegui—as viable ways to incorporate indigenous citizens into a more modern, mestizo society. Repertorio americano's weekly pedagogical column, “¿Qué hora es?”, regularly featured educators such as Mexican SEP Sub-Secretary Elena Torres and Chilean visiting SEP inspector, Gabriela Mistral. In the 1930s, Costa Rican educational writers, such as Joaquín García Monge, Omar Dengo, Emma Gamboa, Roberto Brenes Mesén, and Carmen Lyra, who contributed to Repertorio, as well as to Germinal and Renovación, endorsed practical education programs throughout Central America. Even the inspiration for Herrera's “poor” education for poor Indigenous students can be viewed as a distortion of the philosophy of practical education. These programs followed the Mexican model of education, consolidated in the 1920s, that was considered “practical” for the realities of the poor indigenous peasants it targeted. Lessons primarily included vocational and agricultural topics, hygiene and home economics, although pupils were also taught “academic” subjects, such as reading, writing, mathematics, and some geography and national history. Mistral's primer, Lecturas para mujeres, published in Mexico in 1925 for the practical education movement, demonstrates that literacy at this time in Mexico served to propagate Revolutionary ideals and the legacies of mestizaje by selecting readings that showcased the greatness of both white European and indigenous Mesoamerican cultures by including texts that featured the conquistadors, as well as indigenous resistance to the Conquest. She also selected excerpts from Dante, the Christian

Bible, and Greek mythology, as well as readings about nature that correspond to the Mesoamerican values of the earth and the environment as sacred aspects of everyday life and identity.

Mexico's practical education, though also implemented in the cities, was primarily a rural phenomenon and involved thousands of maestros rurales, or rural teachers, who were dispatched throughout the countryside.⁴ Under the rural education program, young urban men and women were trained to go into rural areas and not only educate rural and indigenous children in academic subjects, but also train their adult family members in skills such as home economics and agricultural techniques.⁵ The adult training efforts were meant to boost the standard of living for children, thus better assimilating them into the nation's Revolutionary society. In Guatemala, Vicente Carranza, the Sub-Secretary of Education's Rural Education and Indigenous Incorporation Section, mentions this influence in his country in an interview with journalist Gustavo Solano: "Se está laborando intensamente por redimir al campesino y al indio. En esta empresa, por lo que la enseñanza rural respecta, hemos tomado mucho de México" (47). Many of the poets in my study also worked as rural teachers: Salvadoran poets Dina Palacios Martínez, Amparo Casamalhuapa, Emma Posada, María Loucel, and Mercedes Maití; Costa Ricans Gris and Emma Gamboa; Hondurans Fausta Ferrera, Argentina Díaz Lozano, and Olimpia Varela y Varela; and Guatemalans Angelina Acuña and Magdalena Spínola.⁶ Especially in Costa Rica (for example, Carmen Lyra and Lilia Ramos), many female writers of theatre and prose were also teachers. Nicaraguan literary

historian Helena Ramos explains that these genres were considered more “practical” than poetry for teachers, as they could use them in their classrooms as reading material or class plays (personal interview). Despite the fact that many of their texts were intended for juvenile subjects, critic Elizabeth Rosa Horan has recently completed an exciting study on Lyra’s subversive children’s literature. The pedagogical plays of Salvadoran poet and educator, Mercedes Maití may offer similar opportunities to future scholars (Teatro infantil).

In 1933, Repertorio americano published a series of articles which were originally talks given on Mexican radio by Elena Torres, a Mexican Sub-Secretary of Education.⁷ This series, titled “Economía doméstica: Pláticas para mujeres campesinas y de poblaciones pequeñas,” encompasses topics such as food preparation and safety, nutrition, potable water, home cleanliness and aesthetics, clothing, and parenting. Each talk, such as the one quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, appeals to rural women’s senses of patriotic duty and self-worth as wives and mothers.⁸ In particular, they focused on basic hygiene, which was viewed in the often elitist 1930s as a way of rehabilitating Mexico’s campesinos from their “dirty” habits, believed inevitably to lead to disease and death. The stereotypes of filth and disease associated with both poverty and indigenous ethnicity—two of the defining conditions of the Mexican peasant reality—also hindered campesinos from integrating into the Revolutionary project (Palacios 316, Schell 563). For this reason, the Mexican Ministry of Public Education (SEP) acted as the frontrunner in what it saw as “reforming” the country’s poor through its rural education program,

which gave instruction in hygiene, thereby aiding campesinos to function as productive citizens of the Mexican Revolution.

Torres's articles in Repertorio americano are significant in that they reiterate the tremendous influence that the Mexican educational system had over Central American educators. Torres was a frequent contributor to Repertorio americano, which, despite a focus on Central American cultural interests, enjoyed readership all over the Spanish-speaking world throughout the early twentieth century.⁹ In addition to her series on domestic education, Torres wrote articles during the 1930s about the moral vicissitudes of sex education, practical pedagogy, teaching and political ideology, book reviews for teachers, and a philosophical article on the value of the political martyr. It was perhaps the reputation of her pedagogical contributions in Repertorio americano that led to her popularity in Central American educational circles. Torres received an invitation to speak at San José's Colegio Superior de Señoritas, a normal school, in October, 1934. In 1937 her Programa de la enseñanza doméstica para las escuelas rurales was promoted by Panama's Inspector General de Enseñanza and published in that country.

Under the model of the Mexican Revolution, the school in Central America became the center of community activity. Not only were children educated here, but parents also benefited from the knowledge and training of teachers, who would hold workshops for adults ranging in themes from literacy to agriculture and home economics. Torres's talks were thus directed to subliterate female peasants who could have gathered in the school to listen to her radio addresses or to local teachers

who would have read her articles aloud from Repertorio americano. These addresses also could have been read and broadcast on Central American radio stations.¹⁰ Over the radio waves, Torres encouraged women to form clubs through which they could share housekeeping tips, form sewing circles, and hold each other accountable for the cleanliness of their homes. In this way, practical education programs served as community institutions that turned education and personal hygiene into matters of public health and surveillance: a Foucauldian arm of knowledge and power that disseminated and enforced Western ideals of cleanliness, housekeeping and dress that would erase some of the superficial markers of ethnic difference that hindered a united, mestizo nation. Unlike academic education—which could have empowered students through reading, writing and mathematics skills, but was invisible—practical pedagogy espoused tangible, visible results in students’ vocational skills, housekeeping, and physical hygiene.

Torres, like other social reformers of the era, called for fresh air in houses, laundered clothes, clean kitchen and latrine, well-balanced meals, and (supposedly in the interest of practicality and saving money) more Westernized dress. By promoting Western standards of modern hygiene, Torres effectively called for the integration and assimilation of indigenous peoples into white culture. For example, in her final talk, “Los vestidos,” she says that men should substitute their traditional white pants for overalls because “este pantalón es más limpio... [y] la mezclilla es de más duración que la manta y también de más fácil aseo” (70+). In the same article, she encourages women to re-design their traditional petticoats and huipiles in order

to use less fabric and make more clothes so that they could have at least two clean changes of clothing per week. Torres ultimately praises women who are willing to “modific[ar] los vestidos regionales y present[arse] más bonitas y con el ideal bien definido de ayudar a resolver los problemas de su patria, haciéndose cada cual una mujer capaz de ser orgullo de la raza” (70+). By updating their wardrobes and dressing in Western fashion, indigenous women could also better incorporate themselves into white culture and better represent its modern values.

As rural teachers and wage earners, women were allowed the opportunity to be respected as intellectuals and cultural mediators between the metropolis, representative of civilization, and the countryside.¹¹ In this capacity, they were agents of nationalist pedagogy. Following the model of the educational system under the Mexican Revolution, Central American rural teachers not only taught the rural, indigenous poor how to “clean up” by practicing better hygiene, but also indoctrinated their communities with liberal ideals, among which was the idealization and redemption of the indo-campesino as the ultimate Revolutionary subject (Boyer 2, 8). In this way, teachers propagated discourses of hygiene and mestizaje, which sought to assimilate their rural communities into a national paradigm of modern, mixed-race subjects. In doing so they targeted campesina women, who, as wives and mothers, were seen as directly influencing the behavior of their husbands and children. In this way, the SEP fused gender, geography, economic status, and ethnicity into a target audience for its rural reform programs of school hygiene. Significantly, the rural educators in these programs were often

female, which further contributed to a gendered association of education, hygiene, and home economics.

In her study on pedagogy, hygiene, and dress in twentieth-century Andean Bolivia, Marcia Stephenson analyzes how “hegemonic conceptions of dirt” can function as tropes of social disorder (113). She writes,

Because educational manuals of the period increasingly correlated hygienic practices with modernization and its concomitant attributes of order and discipline, hygiene clearly signified more than “simply” being clean. It acquired obvious political and social meanings as it began to figure predominantly in the ordering of rural indigenous communities. (121)

Dirt took on similar signification in Central America, where Guatemalan Fernando Juárez Muñoz and Salvadoran Adolfo Herrera Vega, two well-known social philosophers of the 1930s who wrote about the “Indian Problem,” viewed education as a primary way to rehabilitate indigenous people into the mestizo status quo. Juárez even goes so far as to propose a “Ley Sanitaria” that would result in official sanctions if an indigenous person’s home did not show sufficient hygienic practices (143). He asserts that “educar es sinónimo de transformar. Quien educa modela de nuevo” (54). Herrera concurs with Juárez, except that he proposes that poor children attend “poor” schools that will prepare them for the life of poverty that awaits them: “la escuela debe tener como mira primordial, preparar al niño para el ambiente en que está destinado a actuar” (68).¹² He also gives advice on teaching good hygiene

in the schools and the role of teachers in enforcing cleanliness through daily inspections of their pupils (72-3, 84-90), arguing that the teacher forms the front line in ensuring the success of “nuestra raza autóctona” (85). Again, this assimilating education campaign was more about making visible indigenous “progress” and “modernity” than about less visible academic empowerment.

Educating indigenous campesinos in both academic and life skills—especially hygiene—acted as an assimilation campaign, one element in what postcolonialist theorist Homi Bhabha describes as colonial mimicry. In his essay, “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha explains that by mimicking the customs of the colonial power, the colonized subject effectively authorizes that power (282). Following the model of Revolutionary Mexico, postcolonial power structures in Central America prevailed as urban, upper-class, educated public servants enacted campaigns, such as that of the rural teachers, meant to erase cultural markers of ethnic difference in order to assimilate rural, indigenous poor into revolutionary, mestizo society. These markers could include some aspects of traditional dress, home structure, and different perceptions of hygiene. At the same time, however, hegemonic discourse also appropriated some markers of ethnic difference, such as traditional dress, food, or perceptions of “native” feminine beauty as significant elements of national autochthony. Playing on the exoticism of their countries’ indigenous populations, Central America’s elite would often romanticize certain cultural symbols in order to advance tourism and fabricate an “authentic” national identity. Not only is there a profusion of “India Bonita” pageants in this era, but also

picture postcards featuring indigenous subjects or architecture, and national fairs and “Días del Indio” meant to showcase indigenous culture.

Indigenous dress, or traje, played a particularly significant role in the romantization of indigenous culture at this time as a site for visually marking cultural and racial difference. Present-day anthropologist Diane Nelson writes about indigenous dress as a gendered symbol of nationality, ethnicity, and class that is important “for the fashioning of both ladino and Mayan masculinities” (170).

Female traje serves as the ultimate marker of difference from the invisible and powerful speaking white male because, as Nelson points out, its gendering allows us “to add another dimension to this warp and weft of nation and ethnicity” (181).¹³

Nelson also attributes the preeminence of the huipil as a national symbol to its visibility. She writes that it is both “site-specific” and “sight-specific,” relying on the sexualized dynamics of scopophilia (defined in chapter 2 as the “pleasure in looking” with respect to cinematic fetish and erotic poetry), which make it “both visually available and simultaneously inaccessible and mysterious” (181, 185).

Corroborating traje’s importance as a signifier of difference, the pages of Guatemala’s Nosotras and El Imparcial from the 1930s feature the popular pastime among the elite of posing for studio portraits as indigenous subjects. As we shall see in the forthcoming analysis of images from de Wyld’s collections, these fashionable photographs almost invariably featured either women or children from the upper classes in a staged setting. The elaborate traje that they wear seems to contrast with their white skin and Western hair styles. Although non-indigenous peoples’ dressing

in traje was common for fairs and for celebrating el Día de Guadalupe, El Imparcial's regular editorial column, Onda larga, notes that the fashion of donning indigenous dress extended beyond the photographic studio: in 1935, the writer observes, "Empezamos a ver por las calles de la ciudad a algunas mujeres elegantes que aprovechan para sus trajes las telas indígenas" ("Cosas nuestras para nosotros" 3).¹⁴ In a separate article, José Arzú writes that, thanks to North American tourists' enthusiasm for Guatemalan fabrics, it is now common for Guatemalan women to wear traje when they visit Hollywood and New York. In light of this trend, he addresses the indigenous women who might be offended by the costumes at this year's November ball:

Pero vos, Candelaria Curup, y vosotras las inditas de todos los pueblos de Guatemala, no lloréis por vuestros trajes y chalehuites que os serán devueltos en cuanto pase el baile. Estas prendas son muy vuestras y es lo único que os queda, con el comal y la piedra de moler. ("El indio, al honor" 3).

According to Gould, these costume balls, in which "los invitados vestían disfraces indígenas," were also popular among El Salvador's coffee elite during the Martínez regime ("Proyectos" 62).

Paradoxically, these visible ways of romanticizing and exoticizing indigeneity functioned as an important aspect in the modernizing discourses of mestizaje. Historian Marilyn Grace Miller explains that mestizaje depended on both assimilation and "the romantization or folklorization of the Indian and the black,

thereby dismissing their active engagement with contemporary political practices”

(4). I call this romantization indiofilia. The concept of indiofilia combines Mariátegui’s indigenismo and indianismo. Mariátegui defines indigenismo as literatura that collaborates “conscientemente o no en una obra política y económica de reivindicación—no de restauración ni resurrección” (250). According to critic René Prieto, indianismo refers to literature that demonstrates “a purely sentimental interest with an attachment to the traditions of the past” (139). I use indiofilia to encompass not only uncritical indianismo, but also indigenismo that fails to revindicate indigenous culture in spite of its initial intentions to do so. Thus, indiofilia, which attempts to recognize and value indigenous culture along with European cultural legacies, always already strips its objects of any agency because it assumes the superiority of the speaking subject. Although meant to be a utopian discourse of racial and cultural unification, Carol Ann Smith points out that mestizaje is predicated upon racial and cultural superiority in that it promotes the survival of the “superior” elements of racial mixing, which are often considered to be the white ones (583). Regardless of its treatment of indigenous themes, Central American print media of the 1930s, which did not include indigenous people writing for or as themselves, evidenced this power differential: even positive, critical indigenist texts, defined by Mariátegui as those that collaborate with the economic and social revindication of indigenous subjects (332), fall within the continuum of indiofilia because they cannot avoid reproducing the social inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous subjects.¹⁵ When represented by non-indigenous

writers, indigenous culture will always be “othered.” Even “positive” motives for indigenist representation result in a kind of fetishism that highlights discrepancies in cultural agency.

Perhaps nowhere did traje take on such a fetishized, sexualized meaning as in an indiofilic article by José Arzú published by Nosotras in 1932: “Me quiero casar con una india envuelta y apretada con el ‘refajo’ que le ciña tres veces la cintura. Con una india que no sepa leer ni escribir ni contar; que no conozca la capital, ni hay oído el cine sonoro, el radio y la ortofónica. Una india que sólo sepa moler y tortear” (n.pag.). For Arzú, the indigenous woman nostalgically represents the past, when his forefathers were conquerers and enjoyed almost absolute power, expressed here in the sexualized connotations of traje (envuelta, apretada, ciñada) and presupposed by a premodern silence and lack of knowledge. The explicit racism of this article does not correspond with what is known of Arzú’s biography: Casaús Arzú writes that he was “uno de los primeros intelectuales que defiende a los indígenas e incluso tiene una columna en el periódico El Imparcial, en la que le pide perdón a los mayas por los agravios que han cometido los ladinos en contra de su cultura” (“Linaje” 89). In a note, she adds that “en su intento de impactar a su clase, se vistió de indígena y publicó la foto en los periódicos y escribió unas cartas dirigidas a los mayas en las que expresaba sentirse descendiente directo de los mayas, con deseos de casarse con una indígena y les pidió perdón por todos los abusos cometidos en contra de ellos” (89 n.). In October of 1932, the editor of Nosotras made an ironic comment about

Arzú's piece, suggesting that it was understood to be a parody of the racist pretensions of Guatemala's ruling elite ("El caso singular").

As seen in the example above, indiofilia often celebrates a visible marker of indigeneity (such as weaving) as a symbolic trope of indigenous culture. To this end, Central American periodicals, including the progressive Repertorio americano, regularly ran pedagogical supplements that were saturated with upbeat indigenous themes for teaching reading and social studies. Just as assimilating discourses protected hegemonic ideals of a modern, Europeanized society, indiofilic discourses protected hegemony by presenting benign, over-romanticized tropes of indigenous culture that did nothing to enhance indigenous agency. We can see such hegemonic processes in action through Torres's radio addresses on home economics, which combine indiofilia with assimilating discourses. Although her final talk encourages campesinas to update their wardrobes, in her next-to-last talk she praises them at length for their weaving: "se está en tu casa formando la virtud doméstica que hará a la Patria grande y a tus hijos felices" ("Economía doméstica, 7. Las telas" 367). She goes on to make folkloric and literary references to indigenous legends of women's gift of weaving, thereby idealizing their craft as a national art and reaffirming indigenous contributions to mestizaje.

Torres's radio addresses demonstrate how the Mexican SEP tried to appeal to campesinas by targeting and even celebrating the gendered aspects of their ethnicity, such as weaving. As we saw in the epigraph to this chapter, Torres elevates the activity of weaving cloth by equating it to poetic craftsmanship. As Torres points

out, the huipil can indeed be seen as a poetic text created by indigenous women who may or may not be literate in Spanish or in the Latin alphabet.¹⁶ Weaving and writing can be linked semantically, as the word text is derived from the word textus, meaning “woven” or “weaving” (Barthes “From Work” 76). Moreover, in the Maya languages, the signifier for weaving also means “grammar” (In Kaqchikel Mayan, for example, this word is kem). In Maya culture, woven garments can be read as texts, as they traditionally contain symbols and glyphs that tell stories. Until recently, Maya textiles have also been used to communicate the home village of a weaver, as each community has its own pattern.¹⁷ As a walk through Guatemala’s Ixchel Museum of Indigenous Dress demonstrates, weaving and huipiles have also been subject to the whims of fashion over the centuries: changes in the huipil, for example, correspond to changes in textile materials (for example, from natural to synthetic dyes and threads), as well as to the availability and circulation of mass-produced embroidery patterns. Nevertheless, because they are not alphabetic and are not a Western literary form, non-indigenous people cannot “read” huipiles in the conventional sense. Indigenous weaving, therefore, is maintained by the non-indigenous more as a silent artifact than a speaking text or a symbol with other meanings of cultural identity. Thus, even when not overtly exoticizing the huipil, poetry about the huipil cannot escape the unequal power dichotomy created by the manipulation or mis-reading of its meanings.

As an article of clothing and national symbol, traje can be understood as fashionable both as an article of clothing and as a national symbol and literary trope.

In 1929, for example, Brenner remarked on the trendiness of all things indigenous under the Mexican Revolution: “Quite true, it is fashionable now to be lyric and mystic and avidly hymnal about the indigenous” (104). Not only did this fashion superficially signify the concern of the Revolution for the subaltern, but it was also often employed uncritically in Central America to both nationalist and commercial ends. Examples of such cultural fetishes—specifically, “Mayanization” in Central America and southern Mexico—have often been used towards ends of economic gain, such as tourism.¹⁸ Historian Greg Grandin, for example, documents the beginning of the Guatemalan tourist industry in the 1930s as a state-sponsored way to stimulate economic growth despite the global financial depression (194).¹⁹ Writing about the celebrations in the Guatemalan city of Quetzaltenango in 1930, Grandin notes that when the train finally came to town: “a group of ladina women sporting bobbed hair and indigenous huipiles mingled with the crowd” (174). These ladina (non-indigenous) women dressed up in traditional indigenous costume, making indigenous identity a kind of performance which they (con)fused with a romantic concept of national identity. In this performance of Guatemalan “authenticity,” cultural signs of a marginalized ethnic group are appropriated by those in power. The pre-Columbian huipil takes on new meaning(s) in the modern Guatemalan republic as it is displaced from the Maya woman who once wove and wore it. Meanwhile, in the Westernized observer’s understanding, new meanings fill in the gap between signifier (huipil) and signified (Maya woman). This tumultuous space is where national culture is written and where the dynamics of national power

is negotiated and inscribed. As a cultural sign appropriated by non-indigenous wearers and collectors, the huipil has been stripped of its original referent: it is now what Bhabha describes as “eerily untranslatable in the racist site of its enunciation” (“DissemiNation” 316). In this way, the huipil becomes an outward marker of cultural identity that can be tried on and taken off by any wearer. “Authentic” identity is temporary and contingent not upon ethnicity, but upon many factors, among them economic and colonial power.

Perhaps it is because of its changing roles in constructing indigenous and national identities that the huipil makes repeat appearances in poetry written by women in Central America. Pinceladas (1934), a poetry collection of Guatemalan poet Olivia de Wyld, reiterates the idea that “cultural cross-dressing” (to use Stephenson’s term) with the huipil was stylish during the 1930s among Guatemala’s non-indigenous elite. Introduced in chapter 1 as examples of poetic marketing, de Wyld’s three collections published in the 1930s contained a mixture of sentimental, often cliché verse, commercial advertisements, and society and tourist photos (many of which also adorned the pages of Nosotras). Bound in no particular relation to the poetry, the photographic illustrations of these collections may serve as the most intriguing content because they give us a unique glimpse at Central American middlebrow culture, or where the literary and mass-mediated meet, often in gendered terms of consumption.

Pinceladas contains a photo of a friend of the poet’s, Raquel del Cid, wearing bobbed hair and indigenous dress, with the following caption: “Raquelita del Cid,

con su seductora sonrisa y exquisita gracia, luce este traje regional” (80; see fig. 1).

The poem “Suavidad” of the same collection is accompanied by a photo of de Wyld’s two little girls—Julia and Elvira, to whom the poem is dedicated—also dressed up in indigenous costume (63; see fig. 2). Both photographs have the staged appearance of a photographic studio, the artificial setting for a performance of a romanticized national identity by Guatemalan elite. These cultural cross-dressers enact a persistent colonial relationship between non-indigenous and indigenous peoples. Describing a similar power dichotomy in photographs taken in colonial India and Japan, art historian Christine M.E. Guth writes that

In imitating the East, the European colonizes and disrupts the authenticity of indigenous clothing; but by incorporating the Orient into his or her self-image, the European also acknowledges that the East has entered into the West. (616-17)

Following this line of thought, Raquelita and the girls have projected a certain amount of Maya-ness as part of their subjectivities, ironically signifying both the cultural importance of this indigenous group and their own cultural superiority to the Maya because they have the means to consume Maya cultural markers. As modern Guatemalans who can afford studio photography, they consume not only the many imported goods and styles offered by modernity, but also traditional native fashion, combining their modernity (via the bobbed hair) with a sense of nationalist “authenticity” and exoticism afforded them by their position of privilege. Photographic historian Rosina Cazali writes that studio photography in Guatemala of the 1930s was a way for wealthy non-indigenous people to immortalize through the frozen image not only their modernity, but also their good taste (47). Referring to the



Fig. 1. Raquelita del Cid, photographic illustration from Olivia de Wyld, Pinceladas (Guatemala: Unión Tipográfica, 1934): 80. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

fashion of cultural cross-dressing in traje, she writes that “photography provided the possibility to cater to the cinematographic deliriums that accompanied society at this time” (48). In the words of Tani Marilena Adams and Arturo Taracena Arriola, the use of costume in photos would also “show both the strength of the native cultural element and the versatility of the upper and middle classes in adapting styles coming from Europe, Asia, or the United States” (“Reflections” 9). For these reasons, dressing up in indigenous traje for a studio portrait was tremendously fashionable



Fig. 2. Las nenas, photographic illustration from Olivia de Wyld, Pinceladas (Guatemala: Unión Tipográfica, 1934): 63. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

among the Guatemalan elite, whose photographs regularly adorned the pages of national periodicals.²⁰

Fashion is a market for women, and, as cultural studies critic Marjorie Garber suggests, a venue where women are also commoditized: “If women are conceived of as ‘status symbols’ (or, more recently, as ‘trophy wives’) in their dress, adding to the perceived social luster of their husbands or fathers, sumptuous dress for women becomes a desideratum” (23). In other words, the status of men (and the subordination of women) is one of the relationships acted out socially by women’s fashion. This social dress code explains, perhaps, why de Wyld does not fill her

poetry collections with pictures of upper-class men dressed in traje (and why indigenous men would abandon traditional dress in the twentieth century while women would continue to wear it). These women's "dressing up" by "dressing down" reinforced both their class privilege (read: their husbands' and fathers' class privilege) and their own disenfranchisement in a patriarchal society. When Raquel and the girls wear the huipil, they are not only perpetuating non-indigenous hegemony by calling attention to their masquerade in Maya traje; they are also sharing to some extent in the social subordination experienced by indigenous peoples.

In these photographs, as in the 1930 celebrations of the Quetzaltenango train mentioned above, dressing up in indigenous costume also connotes festivity and fun. To this end, postcolonial elites who don native dress effectively "carnivalize" their cultural power.²¹ In Rabelais and His World, Mikhail Bakhtin understands carnival as an opportunity for transgression. According to his vision of the carnivalesque, Raquelita and the girls' dressing up in regional indigenous traje subverts social and political order by putting it on ludic display. Carnival does not necessarily transgress hegemonic order, however, but may, in fact, act it out, as Joseph Roach has demonstrated (244). In Roach's vision, masquerade can act as a parody that turns on itself by legitimizing what it seeks to criticize.²² In this way, Raquelita and the girls act out their privileged positions paradoxically, in that, by "dressing down" as Maya women, they call attention to what they are not and reinforce their position of class and racial privilege in Guatemalan society. Their nominally disruptive performance

emphasizes the inequality between the indigenous and non-indigenous, or what Arriola has termed the “bipolaridad indio-ladino,” in Guatemala despite a Central American discourse of mestizaje (Etnicidad 45).

In another uncritical appropriation of indigenous tropes, the cover illustration of de Wyld’s later collection, Destellos del alma (1936), displays a similarly uncritical use of an indigenous trope, as it features a “Maya” woman—whose skin tone is strikingly white—carrying a cántaro, or an earthenware pot of water, on her head beside the volcananic Lago de Atitlán, Guatemala’s preeminent nationalist landscape feature (see fig. 3). Accordingly, the collection announces itself as an intrinsically “Guatemalan” text, celebrating both the tropical landscape and native culture. This “Guatemalan-ness,” however, does not go past the book’s cover. Like her previous two poetry collections, Destellos del alma contains pretentiously Romantic, imitative, and superficial verse decorated with color photos of Guatemalan high society and national landmarks and landscapes. In fact, only two literary examples of indiofilia occur in De Wyld’s three poetry collections of 1934, 1935 and 1936. The poem, “Música india,” in Destellos del alma, laconically describes the “música triste de suave armonía” (1) played by “dos pares de indios [que] tocan sin descanso / las notas sonoras de un plácido son” (5-6). The prose piece, “Al caer de la tarde,” of Pinceladas pretends to be a “legend” about “Sara, una indita,” who sees a vision of the Virgin along the banks of the river Torojá. When no one believes her story, she dies, and to this day her smiling ghost can be seen walking along the riverbanks at sundown. This gratuitous appropriation of indiofilic



Fig. 3. Cover art from Olivia de Wyld, Destellos del alma (Guatemala: Talleres Tipográficos San Antonio, 1936). Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

themes by de Wyld is underscored by the photographs of Raquelita (who, with her “seductora sonrisa,” could represent the smiling ghost of Sara) and of a bare-chested Indigenous carrying a cántaro on her head (see fig. 4).

The image of an indigenous woman with a cántaro seems to have been a very popular trope of indigeneity during the 1930s in Central America, perhaps for the perceived exoticism of carrying a vessel of water on one’s head. De Wyld’s collection, Pinceladas, features another photo of a Maya woman with a cántaro.



Fig. 4. Barechested indigenous woman with no caption from Olivia de De Wyld, Pinceladas (Guatemala: Unión Tipográfica, 1934): 81. Courtesy of the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

This image, however, conflates gender and ethnic differences, as its focal point is the woman's naked chest. Literally stripped of her huipil, this dark-skinned woman is identifiably Maya by her morga, or checkered skirt. Unlike Raquelita, this nameless, captionless subject is not in the staged setting of the photographer's studio: there is no self-consciousness to the picture to suggest a transcultural performance or complicity with the photographer. Adams and Taracena write that this “‘natural’ space began to serve as a social reference for the model,” effectively locating them in

their different social classes (i.e., outdoors instead of inside the constructed space of the photographer's studio) and making them appear more "authentic" ("Photography" 10). In fact, the subject is apparently not aware of being photographed, which suggests that the photographer acted as something of a voyeur, a position that the viewer of this small photo must also occupy. As both sexual and cultural voyeur, the viewer is located in a position of power over the woman, making her the object of a fetishistic gaze. In opposition to her being female and indigenous, this scopophilic gaze that is implicitly male and Western, thus reinscribing the gendered aspect of ethnic difference described above. The fetishism of these images is reinforced by their exoticism, which Adams and Taracena argue was important into the 1930s and 40s not only for developing the national tourist industry, but also to stage "a bucolic image of the tropics" that implied an urban consumer ("Photography" 8, 10). By focusing on ethnogeographic differences, these photos helped to fashion non-indigenous identity as modern and progressive. For the colonizing viewer, the exoticism of the photograph justifies exploiting the private for public consumption: like circus novelties or museum artifacts, these curious figures are meant to be exhibited for privileged eyes.

In addition to her being positioned as the fetish object in this photo, the nakedness of the indigenous woman signifies to the viewer her lack of civilization. As critic Mariselle Meléndez writes about the rhetoric of clothing in an earlier context, "In the case of colonial Spanish America, the absence or lack of clothing functioned as a determinant factor to classify and categorize others. Difference was

visually and discursively constructed through the rhetoric of clothing” (17).

Functioning in a similar way, this photo reenacts colonial power structures in Guatemala, where the presence of Western clothing signified the civilized, white, elite, and nakedness denoted pre-Columbian barbarism. For the viewer—whose position is implicitly non-indigenous, male, and colonizing—the woman in the photograph is thus construed as uncultured and backwards, not part of the progressive project of mestizaje that many Central American intellectuals promoted in the 1930s.

Fortunately, de Wyld is the only female poet in my study who employs indigenous representations to such an uncritical degree, although her photographs were status quo in 1930s Guatemala. Her romanticized indiofilia is significant, however, in that it speaks to the myriad types of indigenous representation that converged to create a complex national identity under the guise of mestizaje. Other female poets of the 1930s typically used indigenous tropes towards more political, often theosophically inspired, ends. Largely influenced by the essays of Mariátegui and his country’s Aprista movement, their verse embraced Mariátegui’s definition of literary indigenismo, or socially-committed literature with indigenous themes.²³ Just as Mariátegui argues that the “Indian Problem” is mostly an economic issue of land ownership that socialism can address (37, 49), Nicaraguan María Teresa Sánchez ([1918]-1994), Costa Ricans Gris and Fresia Brenes de Hilarova (dates unknown), and Honduran Argentina Díaz Lozano (1912-?) write indigenist poetry during the 1930s with a decidedly Marxist perspective and concern for the indigenous

laborforce. Nicaraguan Carmen Sobalvarro (1908-194?) used indigenous identity in “La indita de Nicaragua” as a form of the nationalist anti-imperialism that characterized Sandino’s “indohispanic” nationalism: “Yankecito de buen color / no me pidas amor... / porque india soy / y con un indio me voy” (1-4). Guatemalan Romelia Alarcón de Folgar (1900-1971) uses weaving and other indigenous tropes throughout her 1938 collection, Llamaradas, in order to imagine an early environmental consciousness based on Maya ecology. In El Salvador, whose 1932 peasant massacre held specific consequences for the country’s indigenous population, the indigenist poetry of Claudia Lars and María de Baratta can be seen as fulfilling yet another political role. Although these two female poets and intellectuals were members of the leftist Grupo Cactus, which sought to remember and revitalize indigenous culture after the 1932 Matanza (Martínez’s massacre of some 30,000 indigenous peasants who were allegedly taking part in a communist uprising) as a kind of political activism through their art, their contributions to this project have historically been overlooked. In the following case studies, we will see why the politics of Lars’ and Baratta’s indigenist verse may have gone unnoticed and how their poetry could have even fed into racist uses of mestizaje by the Martínez regime.

In light of the ethnic cleansing that characterized the Martínez government, it is ironic that this dictator also promoted the glorification of indigenous culture as a part of modern Salvadoran nationalism. Gould explains this paradox, stating that Martínez exalted El Salvador’s indigenous patrimony as a strategy to explain away

indigenous traditions in El Salvador and to conscript indigeneity to the past while asserting a present of modern, mestizo (read: “de-indianized”) culture (“Proyectos” 62). Lara-Martínez describes the extent to which Martínez celebrated indigenous heritage in an annual indigenous festival that took place in the country’s capital:

Toda sociedad se renueva anualmente por medio de rituales cívicos en los cuales—como verdadera sociedad del espectáculo—proyecta para sí una imagen redoblada de sí misma. Hacia 1937, ese cuadro panorámico que el gobierno del General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez forja del país entremezcla turismo, antropología, pintura, literatura, decoración y el trabajo músico-teatral de Baratta. Todas las artes en su conjunto “redimen” al “indio” de la indiferencia al fijar su imagen idealizada para el consumo urbano. (“Al croar del sapo” n.pag.)

In the national imaginary, such a spectacle of indiofilia—similar to Ubico’s November ferias meant to present Guatemala as a bucolic paradise to foreign investors and tourists—displaces attention to the country’s current indigenous reality of poverty and ethnic cleansing. Ironically, this theatrical propaganda complements the Martínez’s military efforts to erase the “Indian Problem” from El Salvador. Geared towards the “mass consumption” of benign images of Salvadoran nationalist identity, such a celebration of folkloric indigeneity helped the conservative government to cover up the historic events of 1932 while contributing to its projects of modernization through tourism. Historian Héctor Lindo-Fuentes, et. al., writes,

“Since the fact that thousands of innocent people were killed during the Matanza was hardly something to be proud of, the [political] right was inclined to remain silent on 1932, finding it difficult to reconcile a discourse of modernization with a history of mass murder” (218). Under the dictator’s regime, indigenous culture becomes little more than a distilled nationalist folklore reminiscent of Ernst Renan’s nineteenth-century visions of spiritual nationhood or Latour’s hybrid modernities in that they combine pre-modern, now extinct indigenous elements with modern notions of national identity.²⁴ Unfortunately, Martínez’s spin on the discourse of mestizaje was not unique to El Salvador: in Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, mestizaje was co-opted by the right in order to present the image of a racially homogenous, mestizo nation that had progressed beyond the perceptions of backwardness of indigenous and African populations. In the context of present-day Guatemala, Nelson has referred to this phenomenon as “ethnostalgia,” or the “magic pull and melancholic thrill of loss evoked by an encounter with the ancient past” (12). The nostalgia associated with such a romantic discourse situates the indigenous population comfortably in the past, where he or she has been laid to rest as a benign nationalist icon, a symbolic specter of nationality.

In her book, Seeing Indians, historian Virginia Tilley joins recent efforts to debunk the present-day myth that maintains that El Salvador has no indigenous citizens. She contends that, after the Matanza, the country’s indigenous population suppressed its visible ethnic markers (such as language and dress) out of fear of racial profiling as communists by roving soldiers. In addition to the popular fear and

military oppression of indigenous culture, assimilation through practical education programs also contributed to the ethnic erasure that resulted in the present-day myth—which historians like Tilley and others have been recently trying to debunk—that El Salvador has no indigenous people.²⁵ Although not stated explicitly, the purpose of El Salvador’s Grupo Cactus, whose name was meant to evoke the “desierto cultural donde estaban plantando su semilla” (Guevara “Las plantas”), was presumably to combat the years of historical amnesia that would foment the country’s myth of mestizaje. This exclusive group included a number of artists and writers who included all things indigenous among their favorite themes. The group counted among its members Claudia Lars, the visual artist José Mejía Vides, writers Salarrué and Serafín Quiteño, musical anthropologist and poet María de Baratta and poets Claudia Lars, Emma Posada, and Mercedes Viaud Rochac (Guevara “Las plantas” and “Serafín Quiteño”). Together these figures—many of them theosophists—produced committed art and literature that not only incorporated indigenist themes, but also took on the dictatorship of Martínez. For example, describing the indigenista and regionalist writings of Salarrué, critic Rafael Lara-Martínez explains that “ese proyecto de revalorizar la cultura popular [...] se convierte en un esfuerzo tanto más grandioso cuanto que, a partir de 1932, el Estado se encarga de arrasar todo elemento cultural cuyo contenido patente se vincule a lo indígena” (9). In this way, indigenist and regionalist themes that featured campesinos can be understood as politically subversive in that they sought to emphasize the presence of a population that the regime wished to erase.

Not all of the indigenist art of the Grupo Cactus, however, was subversive. Many of the portraits of Mejía Vides, for example, uncritically depict indigenous peasants with props or costume that effectively underline their difference with respect to modernity and urbanization. Although probably meant as a positive depiction of an indigenous subject and a revalorization of indigenous culture, such indiofilia—whether consciously meaning to objectify indigenous culture or not—had a dual effect: contributing to the dictatorship’s portrayal of indigenous culture as part of a romanticized past. Thus, even though well-intentioned, these indiofilic representations could have acted as ethnic sepulchers instead of proponents of a vibrant indigenous culture. As mestizaje served as such a contested cultural and nationalist discourse for the political left and right, artists and intellectuals often had little control over how their indigenous-themed representations would be received. It is in this context that Lars’s and Baratta’s indigenist poetry can take on contrived interpretations that could have supported unintended ideologies.

Like the Guatemalan poets that we have seen, Lars employs the trope of indigenous dress—specifically, the huipil—as a central image in her poem, “La Virgen de Las Tunas” (Canción redonda, 1937). Here, however, the huipil takes on a decidedly more political significance. In this poem, the speaker asks the Salvadoran national virgin where she got her white huipil that “manos indias tejieron” (15). Read with an eye to the historical context of this poem, this seemingly innocent reference to a woman’s shirt can be understood as a political statement. After the Matanza, El Salvador’s indigenous population was forbidden to

wear traditional traje, construed as a sign of peasant solidarity, because it represented an act of cultural resistance against the Martínez government (Dunkerley 165, Tilley 31, Alegría personal interview).²⁶ Keeping in mind the social and political stigmas of traje at the time of the publication of “La Virgen de las Tunas,” the subversion of the huipil as a poetic image is reinforced.

The huipil, stripped from its original wearer, takes on new connotations as it clothes the Virgin in this poem. Its presence, along with other offerings, suggests the activities of an indigenous cofradía, a religious fraternity that tended to the care and celebration of a local saint:

¿En qué huerta cortaron las yerbas olorosas
y las frutas diversas
que en canasta de caña humillan a tus plantas
el candor de su ofrenda? (17-20)

The same people who made these humble offerings also would have clothed and tended to the Virgin. In 1932, the town of Izalco passed a resolution outlawing cofradía activities, gatherings, and celebrations, stating that they were actually political rallies (Tilley 166). This official injunction against cofradías suggests that similar attitudes were held elsewhere, again making Lars’s reference to the organizations nostalgically dissident. Casting official discourse aside, Lars effectively uses poetic discourse to unify the country through imagery of cofradista offerings to the indigenous Virgin, the national religious icon who engenders both

the indigenous and European races through her syncretic combination of indigenous phenotypes with a representation of European religious iconography.

With the unspoken context of the Matanza in mind, the content of the last two stanzas of “La Virgen de las Tunas” take on a ghostly political significance:

No mires el pasado, ni el mañana indeciso
 turbe tu faz serena.
 Recuerda que tu raza, oscura y misteriosa,
 nunca levanta queja.

Ha de sobrar amor para ese niño tuyo,
 caído en tu tristeza.
 ¡Tal vez habrá de ser, al correr de los años,
 el Amo de la tierra! (41-8).

Looking to the past conventionally connotes the story of Lot’s wife in Genesis 19:15-26. Rescued by angels from Sodom, Lot and his family were entreated not to look back at the devastation of the city. When Lot’s wife looked behind her, she turned into a pillar of salt. This superficial, Biblical interpretation, however, can be seen as veiling another, more subversive one. Read with the historical context of 1930s El Salvador in mind, however, when the speaker commands the Virgin (or her mestizo or indigenous reader) not to remember the past, s/he could be referring specifically to the Matanza, which, as Tilley’s book argues, was the culmination of dozens of indigenous revolts in El Salvador since the Conquest. By reminding the

Virgin that her indigenous race “nunca levanta queja,” the speaker not only could be referring to centuries of resignation by El Salvador’s indigenous people, but also reinforcing the international opinion that Salvadoran peasants were not communist organizers and that Martínez had no motive (political or otherwise) for the events of 1932.²⁷ In the last stanza, the Virgin is converted into the madre-patria, itself.

Urging the Virgin to tend to her child, the speaker prophesizes that this child—the Salvadoran Pipil or mestizo—will one day be the Master of the land.²⁸ The conventional, Christian interpretation of this verse merely indicates that the Christ-child will be Lord. A more radical interpretation, however, states that this child—at least partly indigenous—will be a landowner and master of his own people: an impossibility under the socio-political hierarchy in place in 1937 El Salvador and, in some ways, a radical proclamation or prophecy.

Like many other ostensibly religious poems in Lars’s early collections, “La Virgen de las Tunas” takes the form of the silva, the traditional meter of mystic poetry. The political impact of this poem, veiled by the religious content and traditional formal elements fitting to a poetisa, was likely not felt by all of its readers, thereby allowing Lars to make her statement without being considered politically insubordinate. In fact, Lars’s early poetry continues to be considered a-political even today. In a 2007 interview, for example, Alegría stated that Lars’s indigenist poetry was not politically-motivated, but rather intended only to remember and preserve El Salvador’s disappearing indigenous cultures. Even today, if not read with attention to its historical context, a politically subversive reading of Lars’s poem can seem far-

fetches. Recent scholarship that rescues the historical memory of the Matanza, however, shows that the Matanza mapped out the need for a space—however coded and covert—for the culture to grieve these events.²⁹ Literature and the arts provided this space, and talking about indigeneity through these media functioned as a kind of implicit resistance to Martínez and his policies of ethnic cleansing. In her dissertation on female Salvadoran writers from 1920-1960, Sonia Ticas analyzes Lars's later indigenist poetry:

Al enfatizar el elemento racial indígena, Lars desmitifica la idea de que la identidad nacional tiene sus bases primordiales en el elemento español. [...] El problema es que esta discusión se quedó mayormente en el espacio literario y no alcanzó a analizar el problema indígena con suficiente profundidad. (238)

Indeed, Lars's early and later indigenist poetry, which formed part of the Grupo Cactus's objectives to document and revitalize Salvadoran indigenous culture, was not stated strongly enough to challenge hegemonic conceptions of national mestizaje. As a consequence, her poetry has been remembered as politically benign and falls on the continuum of indiofilia by appearing to be only a romantization of indigenous culture.

In addition to Lars, the Grupo Cactus included a pianist and ethnomusicologist whose work as a poet has been forgotten. María de Baratta, whose contributions to the preservation of Salvadoran indigenous music have recently been profiled by Lara-Martínez, was esteemed throughout Central America

as an folklorist and musician. Lara-Martínez writes that, by composing and performing an indigenist score in 1937, Baratta's "presencia contradictoria personifica lo abolido. Su evocación remite a la justificación de un régimen dictatorial..." ("Al croar" n.pag.) With its contradictory effects of memorializing and revitalizing indigenous culture, Baratta's music also fell on the continuum of indiofilia.

When she visited Guatemala in 1935, Nosotras ran a story on this exemplary woman that included one of her poems, "El son indio" (Her poetry was also occasionally featured in El Imparcial). This prose poem gives a costumbrista description of a Salvadoran indigenous fiesta whose highlight is a woman in traje:

Salió del rancho una SIHUAPIL, y al verla, con su andar de yegua cadenciosa, su cuerpo de barro abundoso, EMPEZANDO A SER, insinuando su feminismo plástico, amenazador del refajo y güipil apenas bastante para contener a la hembra que brotaba, despertó la admiración de todos. Al caminar, se notaba la prematura palpitación de las carnes subversivas de aquella espléndida estatua de bronce.

(verset 8)

Although the speaker of "El son indio" is ungendered, his or her gaze of the sihuapil, or girl, is expressed in terms that carry sexualized connotations: her walk like a mare, her supple femininity, the premature palpitation of subversive flesh.

The speaker calls special attention to the girl's clothes, especially to how her skirt (refajo) and huipil scarcely cover her threatening, enticing body. As she is

being visually devoured by the crowd that watches her dance, she is also exoticized through her clothing, effectively removing her from the speaker by underlining her gender and ethnic differences:

La india es el punto central de la rueda y de las miradas. [...] La tela apretada del refajo peshte modela las formas magníficas. [...] Y ella, con sus ojos fiesteros, y la boca en puchero bailaba. [...] Y ella, la india que danza, revienta y florece en su sonrisa de mazorca abierta.
(9, 10)

The speaker further fetishizes her by overinvesting her body parts, such as her eyes, mouth, and smile, with meanings of eroticized otherness. The dancing girl can have no subjectivity of her own or exist as a whole person; she is a conglomerate of body parts and articles of clothing that serve as signifiers of gender and indigeneity. Her feminine difference not only highlights the masculinity and agency of her viewer (whose sight and speech imply that he is a non-indigenous male), but also the relative masculinity of her indigenous male dance partner: “El indio se cuadra, agacha el sombrero de un lado, se ciñe el machete y al comenzar la muchacha, la sigue en sus giros con presteza y animosidad” (9). Even though her partner is also characterized fragmentarily through the symbols of his hat and machete, he actively pursues her in this erotically-painted dance. Gender and ethnicity combine here to paint the ultimate conquerable object of Western desire, thereby also satisfying the reader’s and speaker’s voyeuristic gaze. Baratta’s poetry thus demonstrates that, despite the likely progressive ideological motives of the poet, any representation of

indigenous subjects by non-indigenous writers can ultimately play into racist ideological pretensions. By circumscribing the text in indiofilia, however well-intentioned, these indigenist representations collaborate in fetishizing native cultures, and in doing so strip them of agency by perpetuating patronizing relationships between Western and indigenous peoples.

The negative side-effects of indiofilia in poetry written by women could have had significant impacts on Western cultural hegemony in that, in the gendered profession of teaching, as well as poetry, women often acted as both cultural mediators and agents of nationalist pedagogy as they worked to educate and assimilate indigenous communities into a more homogenous national model of the ideal citizen. They also promoted the political ideals of mestizaje, which invariably erased some aspects of indigeneity in a move towards assimilation while highlighting others as romanticized symbols of national autonomy. Elena Torres, an education leader in both Mexico and Central America, called on indigenous women to adopt more Western dress standards in an effort to revolutionize what many social reformists perceived as the indigenous peasant's problem of poor hygiene and living standards. At the same time, she contradicts her racially prejudiced messages of assimilation by encouraging women in their weaving, valued both as a noble craft (evoking a gendered version of the nation-building myth of the noble savage) and as an aesthetic symbol of national autochthony. Sharing in this Romantic appropriation of indigenous women's weaving, in the photographs of the poetic collections of de Wyld, we saw how certain bourgeois women in Guatemala donned indigenous traje

in spectacles of cultural and class privilege and projects of a modern, national expression. Other poets of this chapter, especially Lars, engaged indigenous themes to politically-committed ends as they sought to preserve indigenous traditions and bear witness to grave political and social realities. Finally, the poetry of Baratta demonstrates how even indigenist texts (or those that, according to Mariátegui's vision, are meant to revindicate indigenous subjects and culture) ultimately fetishize indigeneity, no matter their original motive. Thus, every case of indigenist textual representation unavoidably reinscribes in part the power differentials intrinsic to race, class, nationality and gender, because indigenous subjects were not given the opportunity to speak. When poetry uses the trope of the huipil, which can be read as Mesoamerican women's "writing without words" (to use Mignolo's term), this power differential is amplified because Western textual forms are imposed over the indigenous one, appropriating it as a flexible signifier of femininity, exoticism, eroticism, whiteness, wealth, and nationalism.

The female poets of this chapter used the huipil to fashion identity on various levels. In particular, they valued it for its "authenticity" as an indigenous product representative of their nation's locale. Joanne Entwistle writes that, in the nineteenth century, clothing was meant to "reveal the 'authentic' intentions" of its wearer (121). She elaborates that, at this time, dress and appearance joined Romanticism as a philosophical and aesthetic movement that "prioritizes the 'natural' over social or cultural" and challenges what it sees as the artifice and superficiality of appearances" (121). As a Romantic symbol of indigenous identity, the huipil was invested with

meaning well into the twentieth century as an authentic, or “true,” sign of national identity. As Entwistle points out, however, modernity is contradictory, and alongside narratives of authenticity came a “heightened awareness that appearance is constructed and can therefore not be trusted as ‘authentic’” (123). The huipil can thus be seen in various artificial settings, such as the photographic studio, which highlights in the images studied the ostensible cultural superiority of the huipil’s wearer. In that modernity (and colonialism, as Meléndez’s quote demonstrated) inextricably links dress to questions of class, race, and gender identities, the huipil also must be read with these questions in mind when it appears as a “natural” signifier of indigenous subjects and cultures in indigenist poetry.

In post-colonial Latin America, women and indigenous peoples have—to various degrees depending on class, education, and geopolitics—traditionally been left out of the masculine lettered city because their differences place them at the losing end of the power discrepancy. As the 1930s saw the arrival and staying power of concepts of both the modern woman and the cosmic race in Central America, gender and ethnic differences led to sites of transgression and even aggression (in the case of the ethnocide in El Salvador). With this history in mind, we can extend the “gendered anxiety” of modernity (discussed in chapter 2) to an ethnic anxiety of modernity in Central America, in that race, to rephrase Felski, pervades the culture as a powerful symbol of the promises and pitfalls of modernization.³⁰ This ethnic anxiety of modernity resulted in a range of indigenous representations by people in the dominant, non-indigenous culture. Even as agents of nationalist pedagogy

(Torres) or performers of Guatemalan paternalism (de Wyld), the women of this study are nonetheless linked in some degree to their indigenous subjects in a kind of solidarity because they are all located to vastly different degrees outside of the institutions of power in 1930s Central America. Thus some female poets, who are just beginning in the 1930s to proliferate the lettered city, attempted to relate to indigenous subjects through the discourses of gender and ethnicity that marginalized them. Much like the warp and the weft in Maya textiles, however, these discourses are originally split. The patterns fashioned from their weaving, even when meant to forge the utopian social fabric of mestizaje, invariably reveal a story of a people encumbered by inequality and difference. Five hundred years of racial domination cannot be easily unraveled or concealed, no matter how skilled the weaver or poet.

Notes

¹ Because ethnic and racial categories in Central America are complex and imply questions of a person's self-identification, as well as how others view a person, throughout this chapter I use the term non-indigenous to refer to criollos (people of European lineage), mestizos (people of mixed race), and ladinos (racially indigenous people who have abandoned indigenous cultural practices and identification). In addition to providing practical examples of the difficulty of ethnic classification, Casaús Arzú links social hegemony in Guatemala to the oligarchy's maintenance of organic intellectuals and educational institutions (Linaje y racismo, 187-99, 255). In this way, her study also effectively links the racist ideology of the dominant class to the Guatemalan lettered city. Although the other Central American republics have been shown to differ from Guatemala in terms of race relations, they are still affected by the ghosts of this racism in that they share a common colonial elite with Guatemala.

² Costa Rica was not included in the project, Memorias del mestizaje. My research indicates that, during the 1930s, Costa Rica was the most racially homogenous nation on the Central American isthmus. According to historian Leslie Bethell, Costa Rica has traditionally aligned itself ethnically with Europe (57). Its 1927 national census reported that only 4.197% of its population was indigenous (Guerrero 149). The frequent appearance of indigenous tropes in Costa Rican national literature, however, suggests either a larger indigenous population than that of the 1927 census or a

disproportionately large interest in indigenous themes relative to the size of the country's indigenous population. This interest suggests that Costa Rican intellectuals were also enthusiasts of mestizaje and that indigenous themes provided them with a way to express their national autochthony.

³ Taracena Arriola attributes the failure of mestizaje as a nation-building discourse in Guatemala to this country's "bipolaridad indio-ladino" (*Etnicidad* 45). Similarly, throughout *Linaje y racismo*, Casaús Arzú has argued that this country's oligarchy promotes a national hegemony of deep-seated racism that frustrates attempts at racial or cultural mestizaje.

⁴ Costa Rica's urban education program implemented practical pedagogy. Here, revolutionary educators such as Carmen Lyra and Lilia Ramos founded kindergartens and maternal schools for San José's urban poor. These urban experimental schools were arguably based on the Mexican Revolution's open air schools, which, as historian Louise Schoenhals explains, provided the city's poorest neighborhoods with bright, clean spaces for teaching children and their parents practical living skills (40). In San José's urban schools, not only did they teach reading and writing, but also hygiene and a Marxist brand of feminism that argued that women could not be good mothers or citizens until the economic inequalities between men and women were rectified. For more information on Costa Rica's Marxist teachers, see Horan and Herrera Zavaleta.

⁵ For more on the gendered strategies of SEP's practical education programs, see Schell, Vaughan, Lewis, and Bliss.

⁶ More female poets of my study could have also been teachers. As biographical information on female poets of this time period in Central America is scarce, I have often used the content of their bibliographies to deduce their profession.

⁷ Possibly inspired by SEP's journal, El maestro rural, during the 1930s the Costa Rican cultural magazine, Repertorio americano, included the weekly pedagogical column, "Qué hora es?" The magazine further demonstrated its dedication to teaching—a profession dominated by women—by including frequent articles by national educators such as Carmen Lyra and Omar Dengo, as well as international thinkers whose work inspired cutting-edge pedagogy. Attesting to the significance of Repertorio americano in Costa Rican—and likely Central American—education, the president of the Junta de Educación of Heredia, Costa Rica, wrote a letter to Joaquín García Monge, director of the magazine, praising the magazine for its contributions to students and teachers (Flores 285).

⁸ Taracena Arriola writes of the gendered differentiations in Guatemala's Enseñanza del Trabajo Manual program, which taught boys to work in the fields and girls to weave and sew (Etnicidad 260).

⁹ In a talk she gave to the Congreso Interamericano de Bibliotecarios in 1947, Gabriela Mistral describes Repertorio americano as a "gaceta ligera y densa [que]

hace de Mercurio andador por toda la América del Sur, y finge, además, de pregonero para reunir a los dispersos y alcanzar a los perdidos” (“Biblioteca” 88).

¹⁰ Gould writes about the proliferation of corporate broadcast media in Central America (especially Nicaragua) in the 1930s to promote the commercial and military interests of the U.S. (111-13). In his interview with Salvadoran journalist, Gustavo Solano, Guatemalan Sub-Secretary of Education promotes the use of radio instead of rural teachers to reach “los rincones más apartados de la República” with educational programming (49).

¹¹ Several historians have labeled rural teachers as intellectuals. Christopher Boyer writes about rural teachers in the Mexican Revolution as “village revolutionaries,” playing on Gramsci’s term, “organic intellectual” (3). Guillermo Palacios writes about SEP’s rural teachers and contributors to El maestro rural as organic intellectuals in the Gramscian sense (313). Discussing the role of intellectuals and indigenous revolts in Nicaragua, Gould cites anthropologist Steven Feierman’s work on schoolteachers as “peasant intellectuals” in Tanzania and Florencia Mallon’s concept of teachers as “local intellectuals” in Mexico and Peru (178-79).

¹² In the prologue to El indio occidental, Ricardo Salazar explains that Herrera is qualified to write about El Salvador’s Indigenous problem because “ha visto de cerca, muy de cerca, al indio: conoce a fondo sus costumbres, sus defectos, sus posibilidades, sus artes e industrias” (3). Seen thus, it would seem that Herrera could have provided theorist Michel Foucault in his book, Discipline and Punish, with a

case study for his theories of vigilance as a means of exercising power and knowledge.

¹³ Nelson also draws attention to the fact that the notion of nation was first theorized by Plato in terms of fashion and clothing, in that political differences were woven together by the “shuttle of popular opinion” (note 180).

¹⁴ Joanne Hershfield also examines the fashion of indigenous traje in Revolutionary Mexico as an outgrowth of the country’s tourist and film industries, as well as a way of showcasing the beauty of indigenous culture.

¹⁵ Texts that were composed by indigenous authors that were circulating throughout Central America in the 1930s included The Popol Vuh (Villacorta and Rodas) and Los libros del Chilam Balam (Mediz-Bolio). The authors of these texts, however, were from the past, and more recent editions have undergone much editing and translations by non-indigenous scholars. Nicaraguan poet, Vital Ñoriongue, and Salvadoran writer, Francisco de Lurca, enjoyed a correspondence in the pages of Repertorio americano in which they pretended to be indigenous Marxists, but these examples of “indigenous” authors were really cultural cross-dressers (see Lurca, Ñoriongue).

¹⁶ With this comparison between the huipil and poetic text in mind, we can almost argue that poems about the huipil function as a kind of mestizo meta-text, in that they are a text (the Western poem) about another text (the indigenous huipil). In that the Western form is imposed upon the huipil, however, we cannot ignore the

violence implicit to this kind of writing and the unequal social structures of an ongoing Conquest that it presupposes.

¹⁷ Nelson writes that in the 1990s, corresponding in part to increased mobility of national trade and displacement due to war, women began to wear huipiles from other communities. She argues that this “transvestism” was also a wartime strategy: by wearing other people’s traje, or dress, women could hide their real identities from soldiers, who were trained to recognize different communities’ huipiles (201).

¹⁸ For more on the use of traje to promote national tourism, see Nelson and Hendrickson. For more on Mayanization due to tourism and its effects on the definition of “indigenous” throughout Central America, see Tilley’s Chapter 4. Whereas Tilley writes about Mayanization in today’s tourist market and how it has affected the cultural identities of non-Maya indigenous groups in Latin America, it can be seen as relevant to the 1930s, as well.

¹⁹ Solano also cites efforts by the Empresa Guatemalteca de Electricidad Inc. in 1930 to jumpstart the Guatemalan tourist industry with a casino on Lake Amatitlán. Solano, ever promoting good will between Central America and the Mexican Revolution, encourages the commercial manager of the company not to go to Havana for business models, but to Tijuana (91). Guatemalan periodicals consistently promoted national tourism by featuring weekend itineraries to various destinations.

²⁰ For more on this trend, see Adams, Flores Castellanos, Taracena Arriola and Cazali.

²¹ Postcolonial critic Christine Guth dialogues with Garber on “dressing down” to assert class privilege. Guth quotes Garber by stating that colonial aristocrats in Japan who had themselves tattooed were “asserting a class privilege that permits them to dress down by dressing up—to carnivalize their political or cultural power” (in Guth 621).

²² Linda Hutcheon has written that the danger of parody is that it can reinforce what it attempts to criticize (101).

²³ The Aprista movement refers to the Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana. Founded in 1924 by Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, the APRA party promoted a continent-wide solidarity between workers and intellectuals.

²⁴ To the Latin Americanist’s ears, Latour’s hybrid modernities evoke García Canclini’s heterogenous multitemporalities. Latour is referring to uneven imaginations of modern national identity, while García Canclini is writing more about uneven development.

²⁵ See Tilley, Gould, Almeida, Ching, Lindo-Fuentes, and Lara-Martinez.

²⁶ Later in her book, Tilley states that there is no public record indicating that the regime outlawed traje, suggesting instead that national memory conjured the idea of the official ban as “a more concrete and comfortable explanation than a more diffused climate of shame and stigma, maintained against indigeneity by Salvadoran society as a whole” (74). Whether legally outlawed or not, in the Matanza’s aftermath, peasants were afraid to wear traje, as it might have identified them as

indigenous and therefore communists, enemies of the regime and potential targets of military terror. As a visible ethnic marker, traje signified for some the cultural backwardness that the Martínez regime wished to obfuscate in favor of the more progressive and fashionable nationalist discourse of mestizaje.

²⁷ After the 1932 Matanza, various writers from around Central America expressed outrage in Repertorio americano over the atrocities committed by Martínez.

²⁸ Tilley explains that Pipil, the Nahuatl name of El Salvador's largest indigenous group, means "childlike" (85).

²⁹ See Tilley, Gould, Almeida, and Lindo-Fuentes, et.al.

³⁰ Felski writes about the conflicting representations of women with respect to modernity: "The figure of woman pervades the culture of the fin de siècle as a powerful symbol of both the dangers and the promises of the modern age" (3).

Afterword

Middlebrow Culture and Poetic Revolution

I was first introduced to Central American poetry as a teenager, when I read the long poem, “Sorrow,” by Claribel Alegría (El Salvador, 1924). Like many other readers and critics, I was drawn to the poem’s political urgency and compelled to read the work of other Hispanic poets mentioned in her text—such as Federico García Lorca, Pablo Neruda, and Roque Dalton—all of whom are men with the exception of Violeta Parra. To paraphrase poet, Daisy Zamora (Nicaragua, 1950), where were the women of her house?¹ One of the possible reasons for the absence of female poets in “Sorrow” is the marginalization of female writers from early twentieth-century Latin American literary culture.² Another reason is that, when Central America began to receive increased critical attention in the 1980s, that interest was directed primarily towards the testimonial narrative and poetry that came out of the region’s civil wars. Many female poets—such as Zamora, Gioconda Belli (Nicaragua, 1948), and Ana María Rodas (Guatemala, 1937)—took the spotlight at this time as revolutionaries and mothers who were struggling for a more equitable future not only for indigenous peoples and the lower classes, but also for women. Due in part to the urgency of their political situations, the task of remembering their poetic foremothers—who also applied their pens towards political purposes—were swept aside. Only in the years after the armed conflicts have scholars begun the process of recovering these fundamental literary histories that establish a legacy of poetry written by women in Central America.

Wishing to share in the political urgency and idealism of later twentieth-century Central American revolutionary poetry, I first approached this project with hopes of showcasing the overtly political poetry written by women in the 1930s. As both a cultural and literary study, however, my dissertation took a different path. At times more easily than others, I juggled archival information with close readings in order to demonstrate how early Central American female poets positioned themselves with respect to rapid modernization and the lettered city. The breadth of materials that I struggled to bring together here attests to a growth in print culture, which accompanied the rapid modernization of the 1930s in Central America, and how female poets took advantage of newly-available media. It was at this juncture that I grew interested in other ways that early female poets were “political”: namely, by negotiating gendered power structures in order to access the lettered city. My dissertation thus also touches on issues of cultural politics in that it demonstrates that these poets altered the Central American intellectual and literary community by marrying aesthetics and consumption, one of the aspects of modernization. I see this challenge to the lettered city as the emergence of a middlebrow culture, which democratized elite culture by making it available to all those who could afford it. Literary values of “good” and “bad” poetry that influenced canon formation (as well as literary histories that mapped changes in poetic fashion as “periods” or “movements”) thus became premised on pretensions of who should and should not be allowed access to the lettered city.

As middlebrow culture expanded from the theme of chapter 1 to define the cultural politics of my project, I also began to see how it played a role in each of my subsequent chapters, which were initially determined by the themes of theosophy, women's liberation, and mestizaje. Despite my dividing these themes into separate chapters, it became clear that it was the emergence of a middlebrow culture that ultimately allowed female participation in these intellectual discourses: female poets effectively capitalized on the popularity and shock value of these cultural conversations in order to market their poetic projects, which challenged hegemonic viewpoints on gender, class, and race as often as they reinforced existing prejudices. This coincidence of a gendered middlebrow culture in key intellectual discourses of the day could be further developed in another study.

Had I written a fifth chapter that focused on political revolution in poetry by women, I would have begun with the debate taking place in Central America in the 1930s about whether or not politics should enter into poetry.³ In 1938 in Repertorio americano, Costa Rican journalist, artist, teacher and activist, Emilia Prieto (1902-1986), wrote her opinion in the journal's ongoing debate, "¿Deben los poetas escribir sobre política?"⁴ For a fervent feminist and Communist, Prieto's conclusion was not surprising:

Si hay [un poeta que escribe sobre la política] es porque tiene un corazón de hombre armónico y simpatizante, dentro del que cabe, no sólo el afecto de sí mismo, como les ocurría a los ángeles mixtos de Dante, sino también el de los otros hombres, y de quienes cerca de él,

junto a él, son ciudadanos que arrojan una cifra estadística, un dato de empadronamiento civil, de nacionalidad y de humanidad en último término. Es porque aun hay hombres que “piensan en su corazón” según el decir de Homero. (6+)

Many of Prieto’s friends in Costa Rica in the 1930s were writers and poets who “thought with their hearts,” as were other writers throughout Central and South America and Mexico who used Repertorio americano as a textual space in which to imagine international solidarity.

With the Mexican Revolution to the north, Aprismo in Peru, and revolutionary movements in Nicaragua and El Salvador, 1930s Central America sat at a crossroads of international movements for political, economic, and social justice, and writers were duly influenced by this atmosphere. Among these writers were many female poets, including the Salvadorans, Ámparo Casamaluha (1910-1971), Emma Posada de Morán (1912-1997), María Loucel (1899-1957) and Mercedes Maití (1907-1974), who wrote about feminist causes, as well as promoted economic and political justice with their verse. In 1937 Clementina Suárez (Honduras, 1902-1991) published Veleros, a markedly Marxist collection that received mixed reviews from critics. In Costa Rica, the writings of female poets Maruja Luján Castro, Fresia Brenes de Hilarova, Gris, and Emma Gamboa suggest that they were friends with activists Carmen Lyra and Emilia Prieto, whose captivating biographies of social and political organizing have been silenced by Cold War historiography. Nicaraguan Carmen Sobalvarro (1908-194?) forged a poetic persona that engendered a romantic

female following of revolutionary Augusto César Sandino. Her compatriot, Aura Rostand (1905-1959), corresponded with Aprista leader Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre in the pages of Repertorio americano.⁵ Many of Guatemala's Nosotras Generation were also journalists, and their reporting on female workers' exploitation in Guatemala's garment industry made national headlines and debate in 1934 and 1937.⁶ In 1944, Magdalena Spínola (1886-1991) of Guatemala publicly denounced the dictator who assassinated her husband with the poem, "Elegía del que cayó." She and many other poets of her generation led the suffrage movement in 1944 and were active in national politics, in both their poetry and other activities, for the rest of their lives. As a whole, each poet in her own country and in her own way contributed to the revolutionary poetics that became a defining characteristic of Central American letters in the 1970s and 80s. Like the female revolutionary poets of the 1930s, female revolutionary poets of the 1970s and 80s—especially Zamora and Belli—generally had an easier time accessing the lettered city because they were part of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless, these women still combated sexism and traded on gender and politics by privileging the experiences of female combatants, peasants, and workers in their testimonial verse. In this way, their poetry both capitalized on the fashionable revolutionary tropes of the female guerrilla and peasant experience and engendered solidarity with the lower classes and a general optimism that revolutionary values would prevail.

By studying women's overtly politically revolutionary poetry, alone, I would not have garnered a complete understanding of how early female poets remapped the

boundaries of the lettered city in Central America and contributed to a vibrant literary culture as the region confronted modernization and issues of uneven development throughout the twentieth century. I also would have likely missed a connection between the poetic projects of early female poets in Central America and those of more contemporary, post-war female poets. Since the 1990s, gender and politics in Central American women's poetry translates to a marked sexuality that articulates female desire, defiance, and disgust and violates intimacy by casting private acts into the public domain of letters. This poetry emphasizes the pain, fear, and alienation that frequently accompany exposing one's private self to the public sphere and discovering the often contradictory aspects of one's sexuality and self.

Much like Suárez and Olga Solari (Nicaragua, 1910-1974) in the 1930s, contemporary female poets such as Gema Santamaría (Nicaragua, 1979), Ana Gabriela Padilla (El Salvador, 1984), Ana Istarú (Costa Rica, 1960), and Marta Leonor González (Nicaragua, 1972) trade on erotic poetry to challenge women's disempowerment. Also like Suárez and Solari, they use the shock value and sex appeal of their verse not only to market their verse, but also to promote their poetic projects that seek to make sense of the postmodern experience in the developing world. Their eroticism is markedly more abject than their foremothers and even brutal as they commonly explore themes of sexual violence, casual sex, and the sex industry.⁷ In this way, their poetics tend to coincide with what critic Beatriz Córtez has called the "aesthetic of cynicism" that dominates Central American fiction in the neo-liberal age ("Estética" n.pag.). The "sexo 'medio' seguro" of poet, Eunice

Shade (Nicaragua, 1980), represents the attitudes of a generation of streetwise young women whose primary concern is survival in an increasingly privatized economy in which everything is a commodity, including women as cheap labor and sex partners (“The Perfect Jail” 20). Like earlier female poets who manipulated an expanding literary market to disseminate their verse, these contemporary poets use the internet—especially Facebook, blogs, personal web pages, and YouTube—to publish their poems and network with a transnational reading community. Their predilection for themes of transgressive female sexuality also suggests something akin to the gendered anxiety of modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century discussed throughout this project.

Similar to the beginning of the twentieth century, the beginning of the new millennium continues to carry with it an anxiety about continued modernization that is felt in questions about gender and sexuality that are expressed in the arts. Just as Central American female poets of the 1930s negotiated contradictory representations of women and men with respect to modernization in that decade, contemporary Central American female poets also contend with conflicting gendered representations—among these, dutiful daughters, housewives, activists, revolutionaries, sweatshop employees, and sex workers—in the face of neo-liberal modernization, urbanization, and globalization at the turn of the century. For women of both generations, then, poetry serves as a literary form through which to express the anxieties and outright fear wrought by the modern and postmodern conditions at any given moment.

In the introduction to this dissertation, I quoted poetry critic, Stathis Gourgouris, who recently wrote that poetry “is a matter of being attuned to the elusive details of history in the making” and that “poeien pertains to a radical sense of the present” (227). In that poetry has continued to provide Central American female writers with a literary form for modern anxieties for almost a century, a study of their early poetry also augments our understanding of how these women both experienced and wrote Central America’s literary and national histories. In this way, poetry once again intersects with fashion, which has served as a theoretical motif throughout this project: by mapping trends in form and content in women’s poetry in Central America, we can have a more comprehensive view of literary culture and women’s participation in it. By examining the arrival of Central American middlebrow culture, for example, we see not only how the lettered city is increasingly democratized, but also how its boundaries changed with respect to early twentieth-century modernization in Central America (which, as I have demonstrated, transformed both fashion and print culture through an unprecedented growth in consumerism).

Fashion, like poetry for Gourgouris, pertains radically to the present and the making of history. Writing about Benjamin’s Arcades, Ulrich Lehmann explains, “a truly fashionable design can never hope to be anything but in the present... [...] The ‘rewriting’ of (costume) history thus continues in frequent installments, and by constantly prompting its own ‘abolition,’ fashion ideally avoids any regressive tendency” (438). Through constant revolutions and innovations, poetic fashion calls

into question the constructions of the present reality as it seeks to appeal to readers through linguistic innovation. Creating an ineffable sense of their actual moment in (post)modernity, Central America's female poets continue to articulate the present by giving it poetic form and inscribing its occurrence, however fleeting, in history.

Notes

¹ The first line of Zamora's poem, "Linaje," is, "Pregunto por las mujeres de mi casa."

² When I asked Alegría in 2007 why she had included no women in her latest book, Mágica tribu (2007), which profiles the most influential intellectuals in her formation as a writer, she replied that she had wanted to include some women but hadn't personally known any female writers as she was coming of age. She explained that, apart from Lars (whom she knew only as a former classmate of her mother's), there were very few women participating in Central American literary culture when she was a girl.

³ In addition to the 1938 debate in Repertorio americano (and perhaps in dialogue with it), French poet and playwright Maurice Rostand wrote a special piece for Guatemala's El Imparcial titled, "Poesía y política: Homenaje de un gran poeta de izquierda al gran poeta del fascismo."

⁴ For more information on Emilia Prieto's fascinating biography as a cultural, political and social activist in Costa Rica, see the documentary, La libélula del Guararí, Chase's introduction to Prieto's Escritos y grabados, as well as Córdoba and Chanto's "Las peras," and Horan's introduction to The Subversive Voice.

⁵ See Rostand's "La patria mexicana es más grande que México" and Haya de la Torre's "Hay que hacer 'nuestra' la revolución mexicana."

⁶ See “Falta de iniciativas,” Passarelli, Estrada and “Donde no explotan al trabajador.”

⁷ Other young Central American female poets who deal with such abject eroticism (which Córtez has called “antierotismo” in fiction [The Dark Side 76]) in their verse include Claudia Meyer (El Salvador, 1980), Krisma Mencía (El Salvador, 1980), Nora Méndez (El Salvador, 1969), Frances Daly Montenegro (Nicaragua, 1968), Jazmina Caballero (Nicaragua, 1977), Leti Elvir (Honduras, 1966), Sila Chanto (Costa Rica, 1969), Dlia McDonald (Panamá, 1972), María Montero (Costa Rica, 1970), and Alejandra Castro (Costa Rica, 1974).

Appendix A

Carmen Sobalvarro: Unanthologized Poems and Archives

These texts are courtesy of the archives of Jorge Eduardo Arellano. They are reproduced here to ensure their transmission, as the only known copies are in his personal archive.

Cómo me llegó su libro...

[De “Poetisas nicaragüenses.” El Gráfico V.200 (15 junio 1930): 13]

Buenas tardes, mariposa,
¿para quién es esa flor
que te has prendido en el ala?
Siento que un raro perfume
se está regando en la estancia...

¿A quién buscas?
Hace horas que te miro
revolotear muy cerquita
del pintado cofrecito
donde yo guardo mis versos.

—Y sonrió la picarona
mariposa, alas de oro...

y me dijo—“Soy princesa
de un castillo encantador,
donde hay príncipes y musas
que tienen por privilegio,
“voces de terciopelo
y de cristal”.

Al decir tan bellas frases
la bonita mensajera de los Dioses...

¿Qué pensais que sucedió?
—Cayó un libro entre mis manos...
y al abrirlo:
¡Maravilla!
Se esfumó la mariposa...
y la flor se hizo canción.

ENVÍO

A las muchas felicitaciones que ha recibido el escritor Manuel Rosales, por su bello
libro “Voces de Terciopelo y de Cristal”, uno la mía muy sinceramente. —C.S.

Una rosa

[De “Juicio sobre Carmen Sobalvarro.” El Gráfico V.169 (3 noviembre 1929): 5]

Para doña Albertina de Azpura España

Señora: Para tu talle gentil
he buscado hoy una flor
que tuviera en su color
los encantos del pensil.

Y aunque te parezca broma
yo recorrí la pradera
buscando la primavera
para pedirle su aroma.

Fui también hasta la Luna
para pedirle fulgores;
porque eres como las flores,
y tienes gracia moruna.

Aquí está la flor, señora,
a tus plantas de princesa;

porque tu boca de fresa
tiene sonrisa de Aurora.

Para ti, pues, una **Rosa**
linda, fragante, hechicera;
me la dio la Primavera
desde su trono de Diosa.

Yo quisiera ser...

[De “Juicio sobre Carmen Sobalvarro.” El Gráfico V.169 (3 noviembre 1929): 5]

Yo quisiera ser gotita de rocío; fresca, fresca...y que los rayos del sol no quisieran consumirla, por lo linda y cristalina. Qué bonito! Vivir entre los rosales; saber qué dicen los lirios a las blancas margaritas, y saber...qué les dicen los jazmines a las rosas, cuando pasan los gorrones mañaneros y las besan.

Ayer (De la prensa hondureña)

[De “Juicio sobre Carmen Sobalvarro.” El Gráfico V.169 (3 noviembre 1929): 5]

La distinguida y culta señorita Carmen Sobalvarro, nuestra colaboradora en las oficinas del Comité Central Republicano pro-Tosta, puso punto final, el día de ayer, que fue el día del Carmen, a una de sus radiantes primaveras, y empieza a deshojar hoy otra más, siempre sonriente, como quien deshoja una blanca margarita...

Deseamos nosotros fervientemente que siempre tenga una primavera más que deshojar.

Y deseamos que su vida sea rítmica y bella como los versos alados y fragantes e ingenuos que en más de una ocasión se han desprendido de su númen de poetisa indiscutible.

Vayan a ella nuestras saluciones fervientes.



Fig. 1. Photograph of Carmen Sobalvarro from “Juicio sobre Carmen Sobalvarro.”

El Gráfico V.169 (3 noviembre 1929): 5. Image courtesy of Jorge Eduardo Arellano.

Appendix B

Aura Rostand: Unanthologized Poems and Archives

These texts are courtesy of Jorge Eduardo Arellano. They are reproduced here to ensure their transmission, as the only known copies are in his personal archives.

Retrato mental de Aura Rostand

[De La noticia ilustrada 59 (18 dic 1927): 2.]

Su virtud predilecta?

La alegría.

La cualidad más estimable en el hombre?

La hombría.

La cualidad que prefiere en la mujer?

La dulce feminidad.

Su ocupación favorita?

La lectura y la meditación.

Su concepto de la felicidad?

Que nadie la conoce.

Su concepto de la desdicha?

Ser consciente.

Dónde prefiere vivir?

Peregrinando.

Su prosista predilecto?

Kempis.

Su poeta predilecto?

Rubén Darío.

Su libro de cabecera?

La Biblia.

El músico que más admira?

El autor anónimo de las canciones populares.

El pintor que más admira?

El mexicano Diego Ribera.

El héroe de la vida real que más le interesa?

El soldado desconocido.

Su heroína predilecta?

La hermana de caridad.

Su aversión particular?

La hipocresía.

El invento industrial o científico que más admira?

La imprenta.

El que más detesta?

La pólvora.

Su lema preferido?

Sólo Dios basta.

[Signed Aura Rostand with “María de la Selva de Ibarra” (the poet’s real name) in paréntesis. Dated New York, Noviembre de 1927. This poem was accompanied by a photo (See fig. 1) and the following text: “Aura Rostand, la poetisa nicaragüense que ha tocado más de cerca la Gloria, y que en tierra sajona sigue escribiendo exquisitos versos castellanos, nos envía su Retrato Mental. Aquí está para los devotos de Aura.”]

Lamentaciones a la Virgen

[De La noticia ilustrada 60 (25 dic 1927): 2.]

Noche tuya la Nochebuena

Virgen María

que has parido sin pena,

¡alegría, alegría!

Y yo, ¡pobre de mí!

que mi dolor

fue grande y no ví

la dulzura de mi amor.

Noche tuya la Nochebuena!:

en el pesebre,

dejas que tu serena
sonrisa se quiebre.

Y yo, ¡pobre de mí!
sólo dolor
sobre el lecho vertí,
sólo dolor!

Noche tuya la Nochebuena!:
tus brazos
a la Dulzura Plena
dan sus abrazos.

Y yo, ¡pobre de mí!
que mi dolor
sólo tengo, y no ví
los ojitos de mi amor.

Noche tuya la Nochebuena!:
¡Tú tienes Niño!
tu dulce boca toda está llena
de su cariño.

Y yo, ¡pobre de mí!

que fresca viña

tronchada fui

¡no tengo niña!

Déjame Virgen María

—es Nochebuena—

beber de tu alegría

sobre mi pena:

Por allí anda mi niña...

¡ábrete el seno,

y de miel de tu viña

dáselo lleno!

Que toda el alma mía

para tu Niño se vuelve amor:

y préstamelo un ratito Virgen María,

un ratito siquiera, por mi dolor!

New York, 1927



Fig. 1. Photo of Aura Rostand accompanying “Retrato mental.” La noticia ilustrada 59 (18 dic 1927): 2. Image courtesy of Jorge Eduardo Arellano.



Fig. 2. Drawing of Aura Rostand. Accompanying title and text: “Siluetas de Zavala Urtecho. La pluma del delineador y humorista granadino Joaquín Zavala Urtecho hizo con estas pocas rayas la representación de Aura Rostand, la poetisa nicaragüense, ahora ausente del país.” El Gráfico V.200 (15 jun 1930): 7. Image courtesy of Jorge Eduardo Arellano.

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